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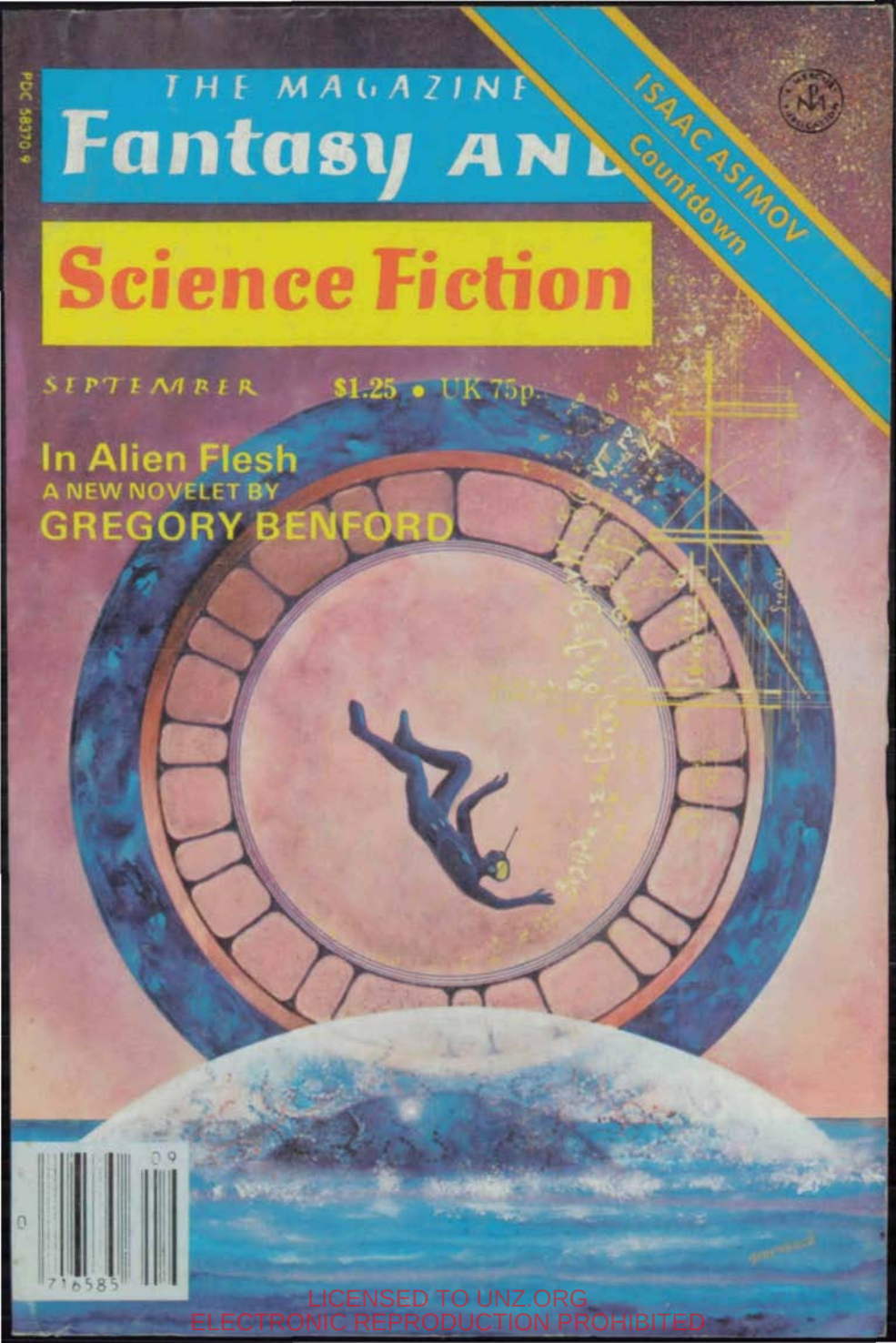
GREGORY BENFORD



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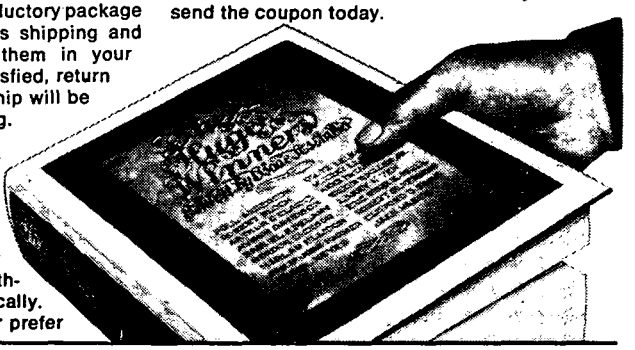

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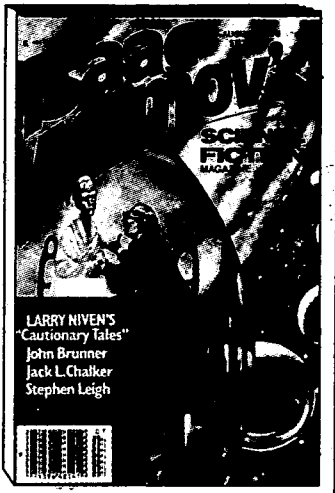

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Greg Benford's new story concerns one of the most interesting aliens of this or any season: the Drongheda, an immense creature capable of creating mathematical puzzles for its human observers. Mr. Benford's most recent novel is In The Ocean of Night *(reviewed in the July issue), a Nebula nominee for best novel in 1977.*

In Alien Flesh

by GREGORY BENFORD

I.

—green surf lapping, chilling—

Reginri's hand jerked convulsively on the sheets. His eyes were closed.

—silver coins gliding and turning in the speckled sky, eclipsing the sun —

The sheets were a clinging swamp. He twisted in their grip.

—a chiming song, tinkling cool rivulets washing his skin —

He opened his eyes.

A yellow blade of afternoon sunlight hung in the room, dust motes swimming through it. He panted in shallow gasps. Belej was standing beside the bed.

"They came again, didn't they?" she said, almost whispering.

"Ye ... yes." His throat was tight and dry.

"This can't go *on*, darling. We thought you could sleep better in the daytime, with everyone out in the fields, but —"

"Got to get out of here," he mumbled. He rolled out of bed and pulled on his black work suit. Belej stood silent, blinking rapidly, chewing at her lower lip. Reginri fastened his boots and slammed out of the room. His steps thumped hollowly on the planking. She listened to them hurry down the hallway. They paused; the airless silence returned. Then the outer door creaked, banged shut.

She hurried after him.

She caught up near the rim of the canyon, a hundred meters from the log buildings. He looked at her. He scratched at his matted hair and hunched his shoulders forward.

"That one was pretty bad," he said woodenly.

"If they keep on getting worse ..."

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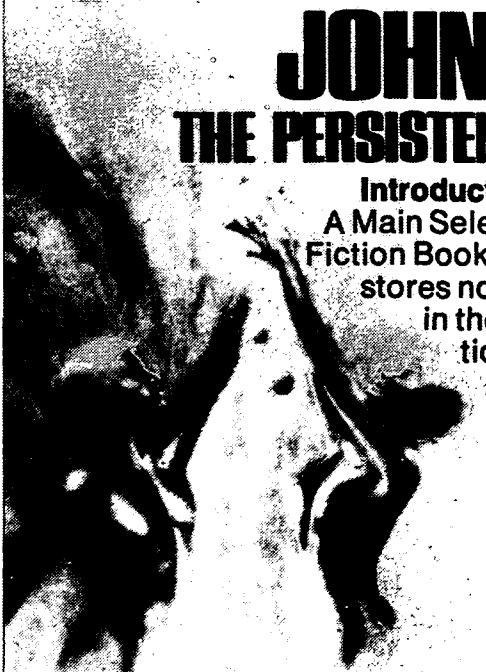

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THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION

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"They won't."

"We hope. But we don't know that. If I understood what they're about ..."

"I can't quite describe it. They're different each time. The *feeling* seems the same, even though ..." Some warmth had returned to his voice. "It's hard."

Belej sat down near the canyon edge. She looked up at him. Her eyebrows knitted together above large dark eyes. "All right," she said, her mood shifting suddenly, an edge coming into her voice. "One, I don't know what these nightmares are about. Two, I don't know where they come from. That horrible expedition you went on, I suppose, but you're not even clear about that. Three, I don't know why you insisted on joining their dirty expedition in the —"

"I told you, dammit. I had to go."

"You wanted the extra money," Belej said flatly. She cupped her chin in a tiny hand.

"It wasn't *extra* money, it was *any* money." He glowered at the jagged canyon below them. Her calm, accusing manner irritated him.

"You're a pod cutter. You could have found work."

"The season was bad. This was last year, remember. Rates weren't good."

"But you had heard about this Sasuke and Leo, what people said about them —"

"Vanleo, that's the name. Not Leo."

"Well, whatever. You didn't have to work for them."

"No, of course not," he said savagely. "I could've busted my ass on a field-hopper in planting season, twelve hours a day for thirty units pay, max. And when I got tired of that, or broke a leg, maybe I could've signed on to mold circuitry like a drone." He picked up a stone and flung it far over the canyon edge. "A great life."

Belej paused a long moment. At the far angular end of the canyon a pink mist seeped between the highest peaks and began spilling downward, gathering speed. Zeta Reticuli still rode high in the mottled blue sky, but a chill was sweeping up from the canyon. The wind carried an acrid tang.

He wrinkled his nose. Within an hour they would have to move inside. The faint reddish haze would thicken. It was good for the plant life of northern Persenuae, but to human lungs the fog was an itching irritant.

Belej sighed. "Still," she said softly, "you weren't forced to go. If you had known it would be so —"

"Yes," he said, and something turned in his stomach. "If anybody had known."

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II

At first it was not the Drongheda that he found disquieting. It was the beach itself and, most of all, the waves.

They lapped at his feet with a slow, sucking energy, undermining the coarse sand beneath his boots. They began as little ripples that marched in from the gray horizon and slowly hissed up the black beach. Reginri watched one curl into greenish foam further out; the tide was falling.

"Why are they so slow?" he said.

Sasuke looked up from the carry-pouches. "What?"

"Why do the waves take so long?"

Sasuke stopped for a moment and studied the ponderous swell, flecked with yellow waterweed. An occasional large wave broke and splashed on the sharp lava rocks further out. "I never thought about it," Sasuke said. "Guess it's the lower gravity."

"Uh-hum." Reginri shrugged.

A skimmer fish broke water and snapped at something in the air. Somehow, the small matter of the waves unnerved him. He stretched restlessly in his skinsuit.

"I guess the low-gee sim doesn't prepare you for everything," he said. Sasuke didn't hear; he was folding out the tappers, coils and other gear.

Reginri could put it off no longer. He fished out his binocs and looked at the Drongheda.

At first it seemed like a smooth brown rock, water-worn and timeless. And the reports were correct: it moved landward. It rose like an immense blister on the rippled sea. He squinted, trying to see the dark circle of the pithole. There, yes, a shadowed blur ringed with dappled red. At the center, darker, lay his entranceway. It looked impossibly small.

He lowered the binocs, blinking. Zeta Reticuli burned low on the flat horizon, a fierce orange point that sliced through this planet's thin air.

"God, I could do with a burn," Reginri said.

"None of that, you'll need your wits in there," Sasuke said stiffly. "Anyway, there's no smoking blowby in these suits."

"Right." Reginri wondered if the goddamned money was worth all this. Back on Persenuae — he glanced up into the purpling sky and found it, a pearly glimmer nestling in closer to Zeta — it had seemed a good bet, a fast and easy bit of money, a kind of scientific outing with a tang of adventure. Better than agriwork, anyway. A far better payoff than anything else he could get with his limited training, a smattering of electronics and fabrication techniques. He even

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knew some math, though not enough to matter. And it didn't make any difference in this job, Sasuke had told him, even if math was the whole point of this thing.

He smiled to himself. An odd thought, that squiggles on the page were a commercial item, something people on Earth would send a ramscoop full of microelectronics and bioengineered cells in exchange for —

"Some help here, eh?" Sasuke said roughly.

"Sorry."

Reginri knelt and helped the man spool out the tapper lines, checking the connectors. Safely up the beach, beyond the first pale line of sand dunes, lay the packaged electronics gear and the crew, already in place, who would monitor while he and Vanleo were inside.

As the two men unwound the cables, unsnarling the lines and checking the backup attachments, Reginri glanced occasionally at the Drongheda. It was immense, far larger than he had imagined. The 3Ds simply didn't convey the massive feel of the thing. It wallowed in the shallows, now no more than two hundred meters away.

"It's stopped moving," he said.

"Sure. It'll be there for days, by all odds." Sasuke spoke without looking up. He inserted his diagnostic probe at each socket, watching the meters intently. He was methodical, sure of himself — quite the right sort of man to handle the technical end, Reginri thought.

"That's the point, isn't it? I mean, the thing is going to stay put."

"Sure."

"So you say. It isn't going to roll over while we're in there, because it never has."

Sasuke stopped working and scowled. Through his helmet bubble, Reginri could see the man's lips pressed tight together. "You fellows always get the shakes on the beach. It never fails. Last crew I had out here, they were crapping in their pants from the minute we sighted a Drongheda."

"Easy enough for you to say. You're not going in."

"I've been in, mister. You haven't. Do what we say, what Vanleo and I tell you, and you'll be all right."

"Is that what you told the last guy who worked with you?"

Sasuke looked up sharply. "Kaufmann? You talked to him?"

"No. A friend of mine knows him."

"Your friend keeps bad company."

"Sure, me included."

"I meant —"

"Kaufmann didn't quit for no reason, you know."

"He was a coward," Sasuke said precisely.

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"The way he put it, he just wasn't fool enough to keep working this thing the way you want. With this equipment."

"There isn't any other way."

Reginri motioned seaward. "You could put something automated inside. Plant a sensor."

"That will transmit out through thirty meters of animal fat? Through all that meat? Reliably? With a high bit rate? Ha!"

Reginri paused. He knew it wasn't smart to push Sasuke this way, but the rumors he had heard from Kaufmann made him uneasy. He glanced back toward the lifeless land. Down the beach, Vanleo had stopped to inspect something, kneeling on the hard-packed sand. Studying a rock, probably — nothing alive scuttled or crawled on this beach.

Reginri shrugged. "I can see that, but why do we have to stay in so long? Why not just go in, plant the tappers and get out?"

"They won't stay in place. If the Drongheda moves even a little, they'll pop out."

"Don't make 'em so damned delicate."

"Mister, you can't patch in with spiked nails. That's a neural terminus point you're going after, not a statphone connection."

"So I have to mother it through? Sit there up in that huge gut and sweat it out?"

"You're getting paid for it," Sasuke said in clipped tones.

"Maybe not enough."

"Look, if you're going to bellyache —"

Reginri shrugged. "Okay, I'm not a pro at this. I came mostly to see the Drongheda anyway. But once you look at it, that electronics rig of yours seems pretty inadequate. And if that thing out there decides to give me a squeeze —"

"It won't. Never has."

A short, clipped bark came over the earphones. It was Vanleo's laugh, ringing hollow in their helmets. Vanleo approached, striding smoothly along the water line. "It hasn't happened, so it won't? Bad logic. Simply because a series has many terms does not mean it is infinite. Nor that it converges."

Reginri smiled warmly, glad that the other man was back. There was a remorseless quality about Sasuke that set his teeth on edge.

"Friend Sasuke, don't conceal what we both know from this boy." Vanleo clapped Sasuke on the back jovially. "The Drongheda are a cipher. Brilliant, mysterious, vast intellects— and it is presumptuous to pretend we understand anything about them. All we are able to follow is their mathematics — perhaps that is all they wish us to see." A brilliant smile creased his face.

Vanleo turned and silently

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studied the cables that played out from the dunes and into the surf.

"Looks okay," he said. "Tide's going out."

He turned abruptly and stared into Reginri's eyes. "Got your nerve back now, boy? I was listening on suit audio."

Reginri shuffled uneasily. Sasuke was irritating, but at least he knew how to deal with the man. Vanleo, though ... somehow Vanleo's steady, intent gaze unsettled him. Reginri glanced out at the Drongheda and felt a welling dread. On impulse he turned to Vanleo and said, "I think I'll stay on the beach."

Vanleo's face froze. Sasuke made a rough spitting sound and began, "Another goddamned —" but Vanleo cut him off with a brusque motion of his hand.

"What do you mean?" Vanleo said mildly.

"I ... I don't feel so good about going inside."

"Oh. I see."

"I mean, I don't know if that thing isn't going to ... well, it's the first time I did this, and ..."

"I see."

"Tell you what. I'll go out with you two, sure. I'll stay in the water and keep the cables from getting snarled — you know, the job you were going to do. That'll give me a chance to get used to the work. Then, next time ..."

"That might be years from now."

"Well, that's right, but ..."

"You're endangering the success of the entire expedition."

"I'm not experienced. What if ..." Reginri paused. Vanleo had logic on his side, he knew. This was the first Drongheda they had been able to reach in over two years. Many of them drifted down the ragged coast, hugging the shallows. But most stayed only a day or two. This was the first in a long while that had moored itself offshore in a low, sheltered shoal. The satellite scan had picked it up, noted its regular pattern of movements that followed the tides. So Vanleo got the signal, alerted Reginri and the stand-by crew, and they lifted in a fast booster from Persenuae ...

"A boot in the ass is what he needs," Sasuke said abruptly.

Vanleo shook his head. "I think not," he said.

The contempt in Sasuke's voice stiffened Reginri's resolve. "I'm not going in."

"Oh?" Vanleo smiled.

"Sue me for breach of contract when we get back to Persenuae, if you want. I'm not doing it."

"Oh, we'll do much more than that," Vanleo said casually. "We'll transfer the financial loss of this expedition to your shoulders. There's no question it's your fault."

"I —"

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"So you'll never draw full wages again, *ever*," Vanleo continued calmly.

Reginri moved his feet restlessly. There was a feeling of careful, controlled assurance in Vanleo that gave his words added weight. And behind the certainty of those eyes Reginri glimpsed something else.

"I don't know ..." He breathed deeply, trying to clear his head. "Guess I got rattled a little, there."

He hesitated and then snorted self-deprecatingly. "I guess, I guess I'll be all right."

Sasuke nodded, holding his tongue. Vanleo smiled heartily. "Fine. Fine. We'll just forget this little incident, then, eh?" Abruptly he turned and walked down the beach. His steps were firm, almost jaunty.

III

An air squirrel glided in on the gathering afternoon winds. It swung out over the lip of the canyon, chattering nervously, and then coasted back to the security of the hotbush. The two humans watched it leisurely strip a seed pod and nibble away.

"I don't understand why you didn't quit then," Belej said at last. "Right then. On the beach. A lawsuit wouldn't stick, not with other crewmen around to fill in for you."

Reginri looked at her blankly. "Impossible."

"Why? You'd seen that thing. You could see it was dangerous."

"I knew that before we left Persenuae."

"But you hadn't *seen* it."

"So what? I'd signed a contract."

Belej tossed her head impatiently. "I remember you saying to me it was a kind of big fish. That's all you said that night before you left. You could argue that you hadn't understood the danger ..."

Reginri grimaced. "Not a fish. A mammal."

"No difference. Like some other fish back on Earth, you told me."

"Like the humpback and the blue and the fin and the sperm whales," he said slowly. "Before men killed them off, they started to suspect the blues might be intelligent."

"Whales weren't mathematicians, though, were they?" she said lightly.

"We'll never know, now."

Belej leaned back into the matted brownish grass. Strands of black hair blew gently in the wind. "That Leo lied to you about that thing, the fish, didn't he?"

"How?"

"Telling you it wasn't dangerous."

He sat upright in the grass and hugged his knees. "He gave me some scientific papers. I didn't read most of them — hell, they were clogged with names I didn't know

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funny terms. That's what you never understood, Belej. We don't know much about Drongheda. Just that they've got lungs and a spine and come ashore every few years. Why they do even that, or what makes them intelligent — Vanleo spent thirty years on that. You've got to give him credit —"

"For dragging you into it. Ha!"

"The Drongheda never harmed anybody. Their eyes don't seem to register us. They probably don't even know we're there, and Vanleo's simple-minded attempts to communicate failed. He —"

"If a well-meaning, blind giant rolls over on you," she said, "you're still dead."

Reginri snorted derisively. "The Drongheda balance on ventral flippers. That's how they keep upright in the shallows. Whales couldn't do that, or —"

"You're not listening to me!" She gave him an exasperated glance.

"I'm telling you what happened."

"Go ahead, then. We can't stay out here much longer."

He peered out at the wrinkled canyon walls. Lime-green fruit trees dotted the burnished rocks. The thickening pink haze was slowly creeping across the canyon floor, obscuring details. The airborne life that colored the clouds would coat the leathery trees and trigger the slow rhythms of seasonal life. Part of the sluggish, inevitable workings of Persenuae, he thought.

"Mist looks pretty heavy," he agreed. He glanced back at the log cabins that were the communal living quarters. They blended into the matted grasses.

"Tell me," she said insistently.

"Well, I ..."

"You keep waking me up with nightmares about it. I deserve to know. It's changed our lives together. I —"

He sighed. This was going to be difficult. "All right."

IV

Vanleo gave Reginri a clap on the shoulder and the three men set to work. Each took a spool of cable and walked backward, carrying it, into the surf. Reginri carefully watched the others and followed, letting the cable play out smoothly. He was so intent upon the work that he hardly noticed the enveloping wet that swirled about him. His oxygen pellet carrier was a dead, awkward weight at his back, but once up to his waist in the lapping water, maneuvering was easier, and he could concentrate on something other than keeping his balance.

The sea bottom was smooth and clear, laced with metallic filaments of dull silver. Not metal, though; this was a planet with strangely few heavy elements. Maybe that was why

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land life had never taken hold here, and the island continents sprinkled amid the ocean were bleak, dusty deserts. More probably, the fact that this chilled world was small and further from the sun made it too hostile a place for land life. Persenuae, nearer in toward Zeta, thrived with both native and imported species, but this world had only sea creatures. A curious planet, this; a theoretical meeting point somewhere between the classic patterns of Earth and Mars. Large enough for percolating volcanoes, and thus oceans, but with an unbreathable air curiously high in carbon dioxide and low in oxygen. Maybe the wheel of evolution had simply not turned far enough here, and someday the small fish — or even the Drongheda itself — would evolve upward, onto the land.

But maybe the Drongheda *was* evolving, in intelligence, Reginri thought. The things seemed content to swim in the great oceans, spinning crystalline - mathematical puzzles for their own amusement. And for some reason they had responded when Vanleo first jabbed a probing electronic feeler into a neural nexus. The creatures spilled out realms of mathematical art that, Earthward, kept thousands working to decipher it — to rummage among a tapestry of cold theorems, tangled referents, seeking the quick axioms that lead to new corridors, silent pools of geometry and the intricate pyramiding of lines and angles, encasing a jungle of numbers.

"Watch it!" Sasuke sang out.

Reginri braced himself and a wave broke over him, splashing green foam against his faceplate.

"Riptide running here," Vanleo called. "Should taper off soon."

Reginri stood firm against the flow, keeping his knees loose and flexible for balance. Through his boots he felt the gritty slide of sand against smoothed rock. The cable spool was almost played out.

He turned to maneuver, and suddenly to the side he saw an immense brown wall. It loomed high, far above the gray waves breaking at its base. Reginri's chest tightened as he turned to study the Drongheda.

Its hide wall was delicately speckled in gold and green. The dorsal vents were black slashes that curved up the side, forming deep oily valleys.

Reginri cradled the cable spool under one arm and gingerly reached out to touch it. He pushed at it several times experimentally. It gave slightly with a soft, rubbery resistance.

"Watch the flukes!" Vanleo called. Reginri turned and saw a long black flipper break water fifty meters away. It languidly brushed

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the surface with a booming whack audible through his helmet and then submerged.

"He's just settling down, I expect," Vanleo called reassuringly. "They sometimes do that."

Reginri frowned at the water where the fluke had emerged. Deep currents welled up and rippled the surface.

"Let's have your cable," Sasuke said. "Reel it over here. I've got the mooring shaft sunk in."

Reginri spun out the rest of his spool and had some left when he reached Sasuke. Vanleo was holding a long tube pointed straight down into the water. He pulled a trigger and there was a muffled clap Reginri could hear over suit radio. He realized Vanleo was firing bolts into the ocean rock to secure their cable and connectors. Sasuke held out his hands and Reginri gave him the cable spool.

It was easier to stand here; the Drongheda screened them from most of the waves, and the undercurrents had ebbed. For a while Reginri stood uselessly by, watching the two men secure connections and mount the tapper lines. Sasuke at last waved him over, and as Reginri turned his back, they fitted the lines into his backpack.

Nervously, Reginri watched the Drongheda for signs of motion, but there were none. The ventral grooves formed an intricate ribbed pattern along the creature's side, and it was some moments before he thought to look upward and find the pithole. It was a red-rimmed socket, darker than the dappled brown around it. The ventral grooves formed an elaborate helix around the pithole, then arced away and down the body twoard a curious mottled patch, about the same size as the pithole.

"What's that?" Reginri said, pointing at the patch.

"Don't know," Vanleo said. "Seems softer than the rest of the hide, but it's not a hole. All the Drongheda have 'em."

"Looks like a welt or something."

"Ummm," Vanleo murmured, distracted. "We'd better boost you up in a minute. I'm going to go around to the other side. There's another pithole exposed there, a little further up from the water line. I'll go in that way."

"How do I get up?"

"Spikes," Sasuke murmured. "It's shallow enough here."

It took several minutes to attach the climbing spikes to Reginri's boots. He learned against the Drongheda for support and tried to mentally compose himself for what was to come. The sea welled around him, lapping warmly against his skinsuit. He felt a jittery sense of anticipation.

"Up you go," Sasuke said.

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"Kneel on my shoulders and get the spikes in solid before you put any weight on them. Do what we said, once you're inside, and you'll be all right."

V.

Vanleo steadied him as he climbed onto Sasuke's back. It took some moments before Reginri could punch the climbing spikes into the thick, crinkled hide.

He was thankful for the low gravity. He pulled himself up easily, once he got the knack of it, and it took only a few moments to climb the ten meters to the edge of the pithole. Once there, he paused to rest.

"Not so hard as I thought," he said lightly.

"Good boy." Vanleo waved up at him. "Just keep steady and you'll be perfectly all right. We'll give you a signal on the com-line when you're to come out. This one won't be more than an hour, probably."

Reginri balanced himself on the lip of the pithole and took several deep breaths, tasting the oily air. In the distance gray waves broke into surf. The Drongheda rose like a bubble from the wrinkled sea. A bank of fog was rolling down the coastline. In it a shadowy shape floated. Reginri slitted his eyes to see better, but the fog wreathed the object and blurred its outline. Another Drongheda? He looked again but the form melted away in the white mist.

"Hurry it up," Sasuke called from below. "We won't move until you're in."

Reginri turned on the fleshy ledge beneath him and pulled at the dark bulbbery folds that rimmed the pithole. He noticed that there were fine, gleaming threads all round the entrance. A mouth? An anus? Vanleo said not; the scientists who came to study the Drongheda had traced its digestive track in crude fashion. But they had no idea what the pithole was for. It was precisely to find that out that Vanleo first went into one. Now it was Vanleo's theory that the pithole was the Drongheda's method of communication, since why else would the neural connections be so close to the surface inside? Perhaps, deep in the murky ocean, the Drongheda spoke to each other through these pitholes, rather than singing, like whales. Men had found no bioacoustic signature in the schools of Drongheda they had observed, but that meant very little.

Reginri pushed inward, through the iris of spongy flesh, and was at once immersed in darkness. His suit light clicked on. He lay in a sheath of meat with perhaps two hand spans of clearance on each side. The tunnel yawned ahead, absorbing the weak light. He

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gathered his knees and pushed upward against the slight grade.

"Electronics crew reports good contact with your tapper lines. This com okay?" Sasuke's voice came thin and high in Reginri's ear.

"Seems to be. Goddamned close in here."

"Sometimes it's smaller near the opening," Vanleo put in. "You shouldn't have too much climbing to do — most pitholes run pretty horizontal, when the Drongheda is holding steady like this."

"It's so tight. Going to be tough, crawling uphill," Reginri said, an uncertain waver in his voice.

"Don't worry about that. Just keep moving and look for the neural points." Vanleo paused. "Fish out the contacts for your tappers, will you? I just got a call from the technicians, they want to check the connection."

"Sure." Reginri felt at his belly. "I don't seem to find ..."

"They're right there, just like in training," Sasuke said sharply. "Pull 'em out of their clips."

"Oh, yeah." Reginri fumbled for a moment and found the two metallic cylinders. They popped free of the suit and he nosed them together. "There."

"All right, all right, they're getting the trace," Vanleo said. "Looks like you're all set."

"Right, about time," Sasuke said. "Let's get moving."

"We're going around to the other side. So let us know if you see anything." Reginri could hear Vanleo's breath coming faster. "Quite a pull in this tide. Ah, there's the other pithole.

The two men continued to talk, getting Vanleo's equipment ready. Reginri turned his attention to his surroundings and wriggled upward, grunting. He worked steadily, pulling against the pulpy stuff. Here and there scaly folds wrinkled the walls, overlapping and making handholds. The waxen membranes reflected back none of his suit light. He dug in his heels and pushed, slipping on patches of filmy pink liquid that collected in the trough of the tunnel.

At first the passageway flared out slightly, giving him better purchase. He made good progress and settled down into a rhythm of pushing and turning. He worked his way around a vast bluish muscle that was laced by orange lines.

Even through his skinsuit he could feel a pulsing warmth come from it. The Drongheda had an internal temperature fifteen degrees Centigrade below the human's, but still an oppressive dull heat seeped through to him.

Something black lay ahead. He reached out and touched something rubbery that seemed to block the pithole. His suit light showed a

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milky pink barrier. He wormed around and felt at the edges of the stuff. Off to the left there was a smaller opening. He turned, flexed his legs and twisted his way into the new passage. Vanleo had told him the pithole might change direction and that when it did he was probably getting close to a nexus. Reginri hoped so.

VI.

"Everything going well?" Vanleo's voice came distantly.

"Think so," Reginri wheezed.

"I'm at the lip. Going inside now." There came the muffled sounds of a man working, and Reginri mentally blocked them out, concentrating on where he was.

The walls here gleamed like glazed, aging meat. His fingers could not dig into it. He wriggled with his hips and worked forward a few centimeters. He made his body flex, thrust, flex, thrust — he set up the rhythm and relaxed into it, moving forward slightly. The texture of the walls coarsened and he made better progress. Every few moments he stopped and checked the threads for the com-line and the tappers that trailed behind him, reeling out on spools at his side.

He could hear Sasuke muttering to himself, but he was unable to concentrate on anything but the waxen walls around him. The passage narrowed again, and ahead he could see more scaly folds. But these were different, dusted with a shimmering pale powder.

Reginri felt his heart beat faster. He kicked forward and reached out a hand to one of the encrusted folds. The delicate frosting glistened in his suit lamp. Here the meat was glassy, and deep within it he could see a complex interweaving network of veins and arteries, shot through with silvery threads.

It had to be a nexus; the pictures they had shown him were very much like this. It was not in a small pocket the way Vanleo said it would be, but that didn't matter. Vanleo himself had remarked that there seemed no systematic way the nodes were distributed. Indeed, they appeared to migrate to different positions inside the pithole, so that a team returning a few days later could not find the nodules they had tapped before.

Reginri felt a swelling excitement. He carefully thumbed on the electronic components set into his waist. Their low hum reassured him that everything was in order. He barked a short description of his find into his suit mike, and Vanleo responded in monosyllables. The other man seemed to be busy with something else, but Reginri was too occupied to wonder what it might be. He unplugged his tapper cylinders and worked them upward from his waist, his elbows poking

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into the pulpy membranes around him. Their needle points gleamed softly in the light as he turned them over, inspecting. Everything seemed all right.

He inched along and found the spot where the frosting seemed most dense. Carefully, bracing his hands against each other, he jabbed first one and then the other needle into the waxen flesh. It puckered around the needles.

He spoke quickly into his suit mike asking if the signals were coming through. There came an answering yes, some chatter from the technician back in the sand dunes, and then the line fell silent again.

Along the tapper lines were flowing the signals they had come to get. Long years of experiment had — as far as men could tell — established the recognition codes the technicians used to tell the Drongheda they had returned. Now, if the Drongheda responded, some convoluted electrical pulses would course through the lines and into the recording instruments ashore.

Reginri relaxed. He had done as much as he could. The rest depended on the technicians, the electronics, the lightning microsecond blur of information transfer between the machines and the Drongheda. Somewhere above or below him were flukes, ventral fins, slitted recesses, a baleen filter mouth through which a billion small fish lives had passed, all a part of this vast thing. Somewhere, layered in fat and wedged amid huge organs, there was a mind.

Reginri wondered how this had come about. Swimming through deep murky currents, somehow nature had evolved this thing that knew algebra, calculus, Reimannian metrics, Tchevychef subtleties — all as part of itself, as a fine-grained piece of the same language it shared with men.

Reginri felt a sudden impulse. There was an emergency piece clipped near his waist, for use when the tapper lines snarled or developed intermittent shorts. He wriggled around until his back was flush with the floor of the pithole and then reached down for it. With one hand he kept the needles impacted into the flesh above his head; with the other he extracted the thin, flat wedge of plastic and metal that he needed. From it sprouted tiny wires. He braced himself against the tunnel walls and flipped the wires into the emergency recesses in the tapper cylinders. Everything seemed secure; he rolled onto his back and fumbled at the rear of his helmet for the emergency wiring. By attaching the cabling, he could hook directly into a small fraction of the Drongheda's output. It wouldn't interfere with the direct

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tapping process. Maybe the men back in the sand dunes wouldn't even know he had done it.

He made the connection. Just before he flipped his suit com-line over to the emergency cable, he thought he felt a slight sway beneath him. The movement passed. He flipped the switch. And felt —

—Bursting light that lanced through him, drummed a staccato rhythm of speckled green —

—Twisting lines that meshed and wove into perspectives, triangles warped into strange saddle-pointed envelopes, coiling into new soundless shapes —

—A latticework of shrill sound, ringing at edges of geometrical flatness —

—Thick, rich foam that lapped against weathered stone towers, precisely turning under an ellipsoid orange sun —

—Miniatured light that groaned and spun softly, curving into moisture that beaded on a coppery matrix of wire —

—A webbing of sticky strands, lifting him

—A welling current

—Upward, toward the watery light —

Reginri snatched at the cable, yanking it out of the socket. His hand jerked up to cover his face and struck his helmet. He panted, gasping.

He closed his eyes and for a long moment thought of nothing, let his mind drift, let himself recoil from the experience.

There had been mathematics there, and much else. Rhomboids, acute intersections in veiled dimensions, many-sided twisted sculptures, warped perspectives, polyhedrons of glowing fire.

But so much more — he would have drowned in it.

There was no interruption of chatter through his earphone. Apparently the electronics men had never noticed the interception. He breathed deeply and renewed his grip on the tapper needles. He closed his eyes and rested for long moments. The experience had turned him inside out for a brief flicker of time. But now he could breathe easily again. His heart had stopped thumping wildly in his chest. The torrent of images began to recede. His mind had been filled, overloaded with more than he could fathom.

He wondered how much the electronics really caught. Perhaps, transferring all this to cold ferrite memory, the emotional thrust was lost. It was not surprising that the only element men could decipher was the mathematics. Counting, lines and curves, the smooth sheen of geometry — they were abstractions, things that could be common to any reasoning mind. No wonder the Drongheda sent mostly mathematics through this neural passage;

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it was all that men could follow.

After a time it occurred to Reginri that perhaps Vanleo wanted it this way. Maybe he eavesdropped on the lines. The other man might seek this experience; it certainly had an intensity unmatched by drugs or the pallid electronic core-tapping in the sensoriums. Was Vanleo addicted? Why else risk failure? Why reject automated tapping and crawl in here — particularly since the right conditions came so seldom?

But it made no sense. If Vanleo had Drongheda tapes, he could play them back at leisure. So ... maybe the man was fascinated by the creatures themselves, not only the mathematics. Perhaps the challenge of going inside, the feel of it, was what Vanleo liked.

Grotesque, yes ... but maybe that was it.

VII.

He felt a tremor. The needles wobbled in his hand.

"Hey!" he shouted. The tube flexed under him.

"Something's happening in here. You guys —"

In midsentence the com-line went dead. Reginri automatically switched over to emergency, but there was no signal there either. He glanced at the tapper lines. The red phosphor glow at their ends had gone dead; they were not receiving power.

He wriggled around and looked down toward his feet. The tapper lines and the com cable snaked away into darkness with no breaks visible. If there was a flaw in the line, it was further away.

Reginri snapped the tapper lines heads back into his suit. As he did so, the flesh around him oozed languidly, compressing. There was a tilting sense of motion, a turning —

"*Frange* it! Get me —" then he remembered the line was dead. His lips pressed together.

He would have to get out on his own.

He dug in with his heels and tried to pull himself backward. A scaly bump scraped against his side. He pulled harder and came free, sliding a few centimeters back. The passage seemed tilted slightly downward. He put his hands out to push and saw something wet run over his fingers. The slimy fluid that filled the trough of the pithole was trickling toward him. Reginri pushed back energetically, getting a better purchase in the pulpy floor.

He worked steadily and made some progress. A long, slow undulation began and the walls clenched about him. He felt something squeeze at his legs, then his waist, then his chest and head. The tightening had a slow, certain rhythm.

He breathed faster, tasting an acrid smell. He heard only his own

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breath, amplified in the helmet.

He wriggled backward. His boot struck something and he felt the smooth lip of a turning in the passage. He remembered this, but the angle seemed wrong. The Drongheda must be shifting and moving, turning the pithole.

He forked his feet into the new passageway and quickly slipped through it.

This way was easier; he slid down the slick sides and felt a wave of relief. Further along, if the tunnel widened, he might even be able to turn around and go headfirst.

His foot touched something that resisted softly. He felt around with both boots, gradually letting his weight settle on the thing. It seemed to have a brittle surface, pebbled. He carefully followed the outline of it around the walls of the hole until he had satisfied himself that there was no opening.

The passage was blocked.

His mind raced. The air seemed to gain a weight of its own, thick and sour in his helmet. He stamped his boots down, hoping to break whatever it was. The surface stayed firm.

Reginri felt his mind go numb. He was trapped. The com-line was dead, probably snipped off by this thing at his feet.

He felt the walls around him clench and stretch again, a massive hand squeezing the life from him. The pithole sides were only centimeters from his helmet. As he watched, a slow ripple passed through the membrane, ropes of yellow fat visible beneath the surface.

"Get me out!" Reginri kicked wildly. He thrashed against the slimy walls, using elbows and knees to gouge. The yielding pressure remained, cloaking him.

"Out! Out!" Reginri viciously slammed his fists into the flesh. His vision blurred. Small dark points floated before him. He pounded mechanically, his breath coming in short gasps. He cried for help. And he knew he was going to die.

Rage burst out of him. He beat at the enveloping smoothness. The gathering tightness in him boiled up, curling his lips into a grimace. His helmet filled with a bitter taste. He shouted again and again, battering at the Drongheda, cursing it. His muscles began to ache.

And slowly, slowly the burning anger melted. He blinked away the sweat in his eyes. His vision cleared. The blind, pointless energy drained away. He began to think again.

Sasuke. Vanleo. Two-faced bastards. They'd known this job was dangerous. The incident on the beach was a charade. When he showed doubts they'd bullied and threatened him immediately. They'd probably had to do it be-

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fore, to other men. It was all planned.

He took a long, slow breath and looked up. Above him in the tunnel of darkness, the strands of the tapping lines and the com cable dangled.

One set of lines.

They led upward, on a slant, the way he had come.

It took a moment for the fact to strike him. If he had been backing down the way he came, the lines should be snarled behind him.

He pushed against the glazed sides and looked down his chest. There were no tapper lines near his legs.

That meant the lines did not come up through whatever was blocking his way. No, they came only from above. Which meant that he had taken some wrong side passage. Somehow a hole had opened in the side of the pithole and he had followed it blindly.

He gathered himself and thrust upward, striving for purchase. He struggled up the incline, and dug in with his toes. Another long ripple passed through the tube. The steady hand of gravity forced him down, but he slowly worked his way forward. Sweat stung his eyes.

After a few minutes his hands found the lip, and he quickly hoisted himself over it, into the horizontal tunnel above.

He found a tangle of lines and tugged at them. They gave with a slight resistance. This was the way out, he was sure of it. He began wriggling forward, and suddenly the world tilted, stretched, lifted him high. Let him drop.

He smashed against the pulpy side and lost his breath. The tube flexed again, rising up in front of him and dropping away behind. He dug his hands in and held on. The pithole arched, coiling, and squeezed him. Spongy flesh pressed at his head and he involuntarily held his breath. His faceplate was wrapped in it, and his world became fine-veined, purple, marbled with lacy fat.

Slowly, slowly the pressure ebbed away. He felt a dull aching in his side. There was a subdued tremor beneath him. As soon as he gained maneuvering room, he crawled urgently forward, kicking viciously. The lines led him forward.

The passage flared outward and he increased his speed. He kept up a steady pace of pulling hands, gouging elbows, thrusting knees and toes. The weight around him seemed bent upon expelling, imparting momentum, ejecting. So it seemed, as the flesh tightened behind him and opened before.

He tried the helmet-microphone again but it was still inert. He thought he recognized a vast bulging bluish muscle that, on his way in, had been in the wall. Now it

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formed a bump in the floor. He scrambled over its slickness and continued on.

He was so intent upon motion and momentum that he did not recognize the end. Suddenly the walls converged again and he looked around frantically for another exit. There was none. Then he noticed the rings of cartilage and stringy muscle. He pushed at the knotted surface. It gave, then relaxed even more. He shoved forward and abruptly was halfway out, suspended over the churning water.

VIII.

The muscled iris gripped him loosely about the waist. Puffing steadily, he stopped to rest.

He squinted up at the forgiving sun. Around him was a harshly lit world of soundless motion. Currents swirled meters below. He could feel the brown hillside of the Drongheda shift slowly. He turned to see —

The Drongheda was splitting in two.

But no, no —

The bulge was another Drongheda close by moving. At the same moment another silent motion caught his eye. Below, Vanleo struggled through the darkening water, waving. Pale mist shrouded the sea.

Reginri worked his way out and onto the narrow rim of the pithole. He took a grip at it and lowered himself partway down toward the water. Arms extended, he let go and fell with a splash into the ocean. He kept his balance and lurched away awkwardly on legs of cotton.

Vanleo reached out a steadying hand. The man motioned at the back of his helmet. Reginri frowned, puzzled, and then realized he was motioning toward the emergency com cable. He unspooled his own cable and plugged it into the shoulder socket on Vanleo's skinsuit.

"—damned lucky. Didn't think I'd see you again. But it's *fantastic,* come see it."

"What? I got —"

"I understand them now. I know what they're here for. It's not just communication, I don't think that, but that's part of it too. They've —"

"Stop babbling. What happened?"

"I went in," Vanleo said, regaining his breath. "Or started to. We didn't notice that another Drongheda had surfaced, was moving into the shallows."

"I saw it. I didn't think —"

"I climbed up to the second pithole before I saw. I was busy with the cables, you know. You were getting good traces and I wanted to —"

"Let's get away, come on." The

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vast bulks above them were moving.

"No, no, come see. I think my guess is right, these shallows are a natural shelter for them. If they have any enemies in the sea, large fish or something, their enemies can't follow them here into the shallows. So they come here to, to mate and to communicate. They must be terribly lonely, if they can't talk to each other in the oceans. So they have to come here to do it. I—"

Reginri studied the man and saw that he was ablaze with his inner vision. The damned fool loved these beasts, cared about them, had devoted a life to them and their goddamned mathematics.

"Where's Sasuke?"

"—and it's all so natural. I mean, humans communicate and make love, and those are two separate acts. They don't blend together. But the Drongheda — they have it all. They're like, like ..."

The man pulled at Reginri's shoulder, leading him around the long curve of the Drongheda. Two immense burnished hillsides grew out of the shadowed sea. Zeta was setting, and in profile Reginri could see a long dexterous tentacle curling into the air. It came from the mottled patches, like welts, he had seen before.

"They extend through those spots, you see. Those are their sensors, what they use to complete the contact. And — I can't prove it, but I'm sure — that is when the genetic material is passed between them. The mating period. At the same time they exchange information, converse. That's what we're getting on the tappers, their stored knowledge fed out. They think we're another of their own, that must be it. I don't understand all of it, but —"

"Where's Sasuke?"

"—but the first one, the one you were inside, recognized the difference as soon as the second Drongheda approached. They moved together and the second one extruded that tentacle. Then —"

Reginri shook the other man roughly. "Shut up! Sasuke —"

Vanleo stopped, dazed, and looked at Reginri. "I've been telling you. It's a great discovery, the first real step we've taken in this field. We'll understand so much *more* once this is fully explored."

Reginri hit him in the shoulder.

Vanleo staggered. The glassy, pinched look of his eyes faded. He began to lift his arms.

Reginri drove his gloved fist into Vanleo's faceplate. Vanleo toppled backward. The ocean swallowed him. Reginri stepped back, blinking.

Vanleo's helmet appeared as he struggled up. A wave foamed over him. He stumbled, turned, saw Reginri.

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Reginri moved toward him. "No. No," Vanleo said weakly.

"If you're not going to tell me —"

"But I, I am." Vanleo gasped, leaned forward until he could brace his hands on his knees.

"There wasn't time. The second one came up on us so, so fast."

"Yeah?"

"I was about ready to go inside. When I saw the second one moving in, you know, the only time in thirty years, I knew it was important. I climbed down to observe. But we needed the data, so Sasuke went in for me. With the tapper cables."

Vanleo panted. His face was ashen.

"When the tentacle went in, it filled the pithole exactly, Tight. There was no room left," he said. "Sasuke ... was there. Inside."

Reginri froze, stunned. A wave swirled around him and he slipped. The waters tumbled him backward. Dazed, he regained his footing on the slick rocks and began stumbling blindly toward the bleak shore, toward humanity. The ocean lapped around him, ceaseless and unending.

IX.

Belej sat motionless, unmindful of the chill. "Oh my God," she said.

"That was it," he murmured. He stared off into the canyon. Zeta Reticuli sent slanting rays into the layered reddening mists. Air squirrels darted among the shifting shadows.

"He's crazy," Belej said simply. "That Leo is crazy."

"Well ..." Reginri began. Then he rocked forward stiffly and stood up. Swirls of reddish cloud were crawling up the canyon face toward them. He pointed. "That stuff is coming in faster than I thought." He coughed. "We'd better get inside."

Belej nodded and came to her feet. She brushed the twisted brown grass from her legs and turned to him.

"Now that you've told me," she said softly, "I think you ought to put it from your mind."

"It's hard. I ..."

"I know. I know. But you can push it far away from you, forget it happened. That's the best way."

"Well, maybe."

"Believe me. You've changed since this happened to you. I can feel it."

"Feel what?"

"You. You're different. I feel a barrier between us.'

"I wonder," he said slowly.

She put her hand on his arm and stepped closer, an old, familiar gesture. He stood watching the reddening haze swallowing the precise lines of the rocks below.

"I want that screen between us

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to dissolve. You made your contribution, earned your pay. Those damned people understand the Drongheda now —"

He made a wry, rasping laugh. "We'll never grasp the Drongheda. What we get in those neural circuits are mirrors of what we want. Of what we are. We can't sense anything totally alien."

"But—"

"Vanleo saw mathematics because he went after it. So did I, at first. Later ..."

He stopped. A sudden breeze made him shiver. He chenched his fists. Clenched. Clenched.

How could he tell her? He woke in the night, sweating, tangled in the bedclothes, muttering incoherently ... but they were not nightmares, not precisely.

Something else. Something intermediate.

"Forget those things," Belej said soothingly. Reginri leaned closer to her and caught the sweet musk of her, the dry crackling scent of her hair. He had always loved that.

She frowned up at him. Her eyes shifted intently from his mouth to his eyes and then back again, trying to read his expression. "It will only trouble you to recall it. I — I'm sorry I asked you to tell it. But remember —" she took both his hands in hers — "you'll never go back there again. It can be ..."

Something made him look beyond her. At the gathering fog.

And at once he sensed the shrouded abyss open below him. Sweeping him in. Gathering him up. Into —

— a thick red foam lapping against weathered granite towers —

— an ellipsoidal sun spinning soundlessly over a silvered, warping planet —

— watery light —

— cloying strands, sticky, a fine-spun coppery matrix that enfolded him, warming —

— glossy sheen of polyhedra, wedged together, mass upon mass —

— smooth bands of moisture playing lightly over his quilted skin —

— a blistering light shines through him, sets his bones to humming resonance —

— pressing —

— coiling —

Beckoning. Beckoning.

When the moment had passed, Reginri blinked and felt a salty stinging in his eyes. Every day the tug was stronger, the incandescent images sharper. This must be what Vanleo felt, he was sure of it. They came to him now even during the day. Again and again, the grainy texture altering with time ...

He reached out and enfolded Belej in his arms.

"But I must," he said in a rasp-

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ing whisper. "Vanleo called today. He ... I'm going. I'm going back."

He heard her quick intake of breath, felt her stiffen in his arms.

His attention was diverted by the reddening fog. It cloaked half the world and still it came on.

There was something ominous about it and something inviting as well. He watched as it engulfed trees nearby. He studied it intently, judging the distance. The looming presence was quite close now. But he was sure it would be all right.

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Our Lady of Darkness, by Fritz Leiber, appeared here as *The Pale Brown Thing* in the January and February 1977 issues. If you have read it, nothing further need be said. If you have not, then you are missing something important. *Our Lady* is a major work of fantasy, skillfully created and unimaginably imagined.

What does he mean by that? What I mean by that is that any thoroughly seasoned and intelligent fantasy writer could work you out a horripilating urban fantasy, using the tried and true elements of the desuetudinous old rooming house and its counterculturish residents, the bit of old wilderness rising atop its mysterious hill in the midst of the city, and the strangely haunted, bookish protagonist who gradually realizes the horrifying history of the place where he lives. Ah, but the *kind* of haunting, and the means by which the denouement approaches step by step, and the form in which the ultimate attack is made upon Franz Westen . . . for this, you need a thoroughly seasoned, very well educated, very intelligent, very talented man who this time has chosen to write fantasy.

You need the multifarious Fritz Leiber, a cultured man. There are things in this book that no one has ever thought of before . . . not Le

ALGIS BUDRYS

Books

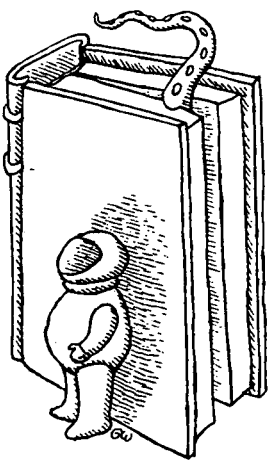
Our Lady of Darkness, Fritz Leiber, Berkley Books, $1.75

Up the Walls of The World, James Tiptree, Jr., Berkley/Putnam, $8.95

The Genesis Machine, James P. Hogan, Ballantine/Del Rey, $8.95 trade, $1.75 paper

Mastodonia, Clifford D. Simak, Ballantine/Del Rey, $7.95

The Best of L. Sprague de Camp, Ballantine/Del Rey, $1.95 paper



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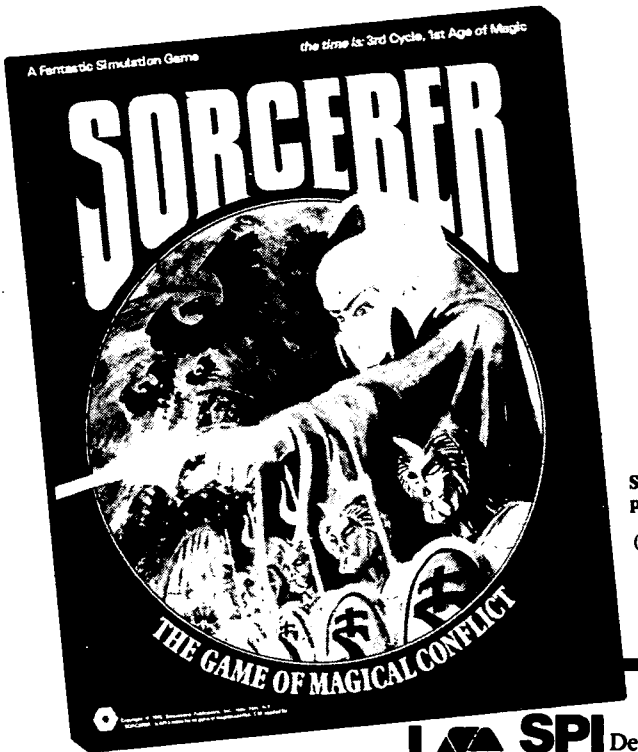

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Fanu, not Lovecraft, not Celine, not Seabury Quinn, not Blackwood, not Clark Ashton Smith (who appears as a character, though not on stage but as the focus of Fritz Leiber's scholarly jest, as distinguished from Franz Westen's desperate search).

One of these days, some creditable arbiter with his wits about him is going to realize that Leiber is a giant. Not just another talented fellow with a pleasant manner and a willingness to take fannish awards for work done to fannish standards. Not just another coterie hero, but a God-damned figure of stature in 20th century literature, never mind any smaller compass.

Fritz Leiber is one of the best science fiction writers in the world—*vide* "Coming Attraction," *Destiny Times Three, Gather, Darkness,* etc. He is one of the top science fantasy writers in the world—*vide* the Grey Mouser series. He is one of the top light fantasy writers, and surely I don't have to quote titles at you. And when we speak so glibly now of "urban fantasy," we pay passing homage to the man who practically invented it . . . in a 1941 story called "Smoke Ghost." by Fritz Leiber.

He holds a Hugo for *The Big Time,* and possibly, since I don't have my lists of winners quite to hand, for other work. Perhaps he holds a Nebula or two.

It occurred to me while reading *Our Lady* that of all the great names in this field . . . the people who are usually listed ahead of Leiber, the people who live in exotic locales or recline upon exotic sums of money, the people who casually hop planes from one festival to the next, and need not fear ever having to steal a cafeteria ketchup bottle again . . . . there are none who do not deserve top awards in our field. But there is one SF writer who has somehow made the Hugo and the Nebula seem inadequate.

God damn it, where is Leiber's National Book Award? Where is his Pulitzer?

James Tiptree, Jr. is really Alice Sheldon, a fact which seems to have shaken the science fiction community inordinately, perhaps because it awarded all sorts of honors to Tiptree, who remained a distant figure whose many friendships were conducted entirely by mail, while Alice "Racoona" Sheldon circulated amiably about SF conventions and made clever remarks. A great deal of wordage has since been expended on the important question of who earliest guessed Tiptree was a woman, who has his/her foot in his mouth, whether there *is* a quality of essential femaleness which is at least theoretically detectable in the work of women, etcetera, etcetera.

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You, on the other hand, will be wondering whether *Up The Walls of The World,* the first Tiptree novel, is worth reading.

Yes and no. It is intensely overcomplicated, in the sense that a great many major plot-points and overwhelming internal discoveries are constantly being made by the principal characters. A new wonder arrives on every page. This wouldn't be so confusing if we understood *where* the characters are, exactly, and which of them is lurking behind Tiptree's less than expert use of pronouns. To understand the story, it is sometimes necessary to back up a few paragraphs, or occasionally half a chapter, and carefully chart out who the "he" or "she" in a crucial scene is, and just where they last were within "it." The story also apparently does not proceed in a straight line, chronologically. There are a great many characters, moving on separate tracks, and when they intersect from time to time it turns out that what had seemed to be simultaneous activities were, in fact, not.

Tiptree has chosen to use one very old SF convention — the interpolated passages which always go: "It moved, woke, thought, looked about itself. Unimaginably vast, greatly ancient, it sent out the gigaparsec-scanning mentations of its kind...." Tiptree puts them in capital letters where Murray Leinster put them in italics, but the effect is the same. Tiptree has also chosen a fairly recent SF invention. The entire book is written in the present tense, so that the actual passage goes: "COLD, COLD AND ALONE, THE EVIL PRESENCE ROAMS THE STARSTREAMS. IT IS IMMENSE AND DARK AND ALMOST IMMATERIAL: ITS POWERS ARE BEYOND THOSE OF ANY SENTIENT THING. AND IT IS IN PAIN. THE PAIN, IT BELIEVES, SPRINGS FROM ITS CRIME."

Tiptree consistently maintains present tense, even in the conventionally orthographed passages concerning the human characters and the inhabitants of the giant planet Tyree. This consistency makes the device useless as an aid in unscrambling the chronology of events, and reduces it to its usual form, which is that of an interesting curiosity all other fields of literature had pretty much abandoned by the time SF readers began praising it for its originality. It must be said that Tiptree handles it well; in no time at all, the reader's mind is automatically translating it into past tense and so learning to ignore it.

Given all that for evidence of an intelligent, talented person trying to make something special out of

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her first novel, and making a series of honest mistakes in the process, we are also given a story of considerable power, characters whose internal dimensions frequently exceed the ordinary, and pictures, pictures, pictures of landscapes mundane and landscapes alien which are not readily forgotten.

The essential situation in the story is simple. The capital-letter creature is a vastly diffuse organism, part of a tribe of such sentient beings which are forging through the galaxy extinguishing suns. Its crime is in abandoning its task. (It's not very bright.) It is withdrawing from the remainder of its kind and their area of action. Wandering away, it is causing suns to flare and die. It is attracted to suns which broadcast psychic emanations; its attempts to communicate with them are what destroys them. (I think.) It has (I guess) no idea that there are such things as planets or that life might have attained intelligence — and psychic ability — on them.

On the planet Tyree — which I believe is not Jupiter, though it certainly is a gas giant — the intelligent life form is a sort of half-squid, half manta-ray which perpetually rides the mighty winds of its home world. This race naturally and readily uses what we would call ESP to manage its affairs. It is now dying of exposure to increasing radiation from its star, which I'm pretty sure is not Sol. On Earth, meanwhile, a CIA-sponsored ESP experimental task group accidentally comes into contact with Tyree's people, and some of the Terrestrials half-accidentally exchange bodies with some of the personalities from Tyree.

After that, the story begins to complicate. Eventually, a number of diverse and interesting characters, human and alien, are taken up as disembodied personalities within the interstellar creature. They are in contact with varied aspects of the creature at varied times, and their contacts among themselves are at various levels of reliability. Finally, in a welter of characters abandoned by Tiptree as loose ends, some of the principals achieve good ends, and incidentally the galaxy is saved.

Reading the book is an at times frustrating, at times highly rewarding experience. The story told straight out would have been more than sufficient to establish this book's credentials as a major piece of SF. As it is, it is an ambitious and very large effort, but one which tried to do too many things, with the usual results.

For mind-blowing conceptualizing, try *The Genesis Machine.* James P. Hogan writes as if he had been infused with essence of Smith — E.E. and George O. — and kept

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in suspended animation since 1938. What has emerged from the cryogenic cocoon is a writer fully the equal of the young John W. Campbell, Jr. If you liked *The Black Star Passes*, you will love *The Genesis Machine*.

They are all there — Arcot, Wade and Morey in modern dress; George O. Smith's fussy bureaucrats and conniving politicians seeking to frustrate the pure enthusiasm and the technocratic rectitude of the ultracapable heroes; E.E. Smith's basement galaxy-hoppers flanging-up the Tuesday hardware which makes full and immediate use of Monday's theoretical assumption.

Hogan is a major find. He is as style-deaf and essentially humorless as his preceptors, and, despite his years as a technology salesman, appears never to have really observed how bureaucrats work inside, preferring straw men and recycled dialogue. But he is a boundless enthusiast; his narrative drive, hiccupping over long expository pauses, nevertheless keeps the whole ramshackle contraption hurtling up the road to tomorrow; his heroes are never wrong, fortunately, or they'd be drawn and quartered for their high-handedness with the lives and fortunes of us poor proles, and his invention never flags. Result: effectiveness.

He writes like a falling safe knocking the balconies off a skyscraper, but he loves what he's doing, and he's plausible as all get-out when it comes to postulating the major new science his heroes use to manipulate the universe. Marvin Minsky even says it might really work. (Doctor Minsky is one of those MIT fellows who actually do the superscience stuff, albeit at a somewhat slower pace.) What more could you ask, if you were asking for it at all?

The Genesis Machine was published simultaneously in paper and in hard covers by Ballantine as a Del Rey book, signalling yet another step in the forward progress of SF's most prosperous book publishing enterprise. Superficially, this is a repeat of an idea originally tried by Ian and Betty Ballantine in the 1950s. But in fact, with the resources of Random House behind it, and a hardcover format which closely resembles a true trade package rather than a stiffened paperback, it is of another order entirely.

Things are changing fundamentally in publishing. Costs — costs along every inch of the way from property acquisition to the overhead involved in writing royalty checks — have gotten to the point where as many operations as possible are being consolidated. If ways are not found to reduce costs, a trade book is *routinely* going to

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retail for more than $10 in the very near future. $12.50 to $14.95 won't be unusual. In fact, except for library editions, trade paperbacks — hardcover-designed pages in soft covers — may soon prove to be the primary "permanent" editions, at something around $7, and rack-sized paperbacks may become shoddier and shoddier in their typesetting and their paper and printing quality, at something around $4. My book club edition of *Time Storm* turned out to have its signatures glued, not sewn, just like a paperback, and, like a quickie-trickie paperback, it broke open between signatures. Bibliophiles will not like the near future. The far future does not bear contemplation.

Mastodonia, by Clifford D. Simak, is currently a Del Rey trade book, with a Del Rey paperback due. It is delightful to see Simak enjoying frequent publication, and a steady rise in prestige which was underscored by his receiving the SFWA's Grand Master Award in 1977. It is even more delightful to see him producing new work so steadily.

Mastodonia offers many of Simak's most attractive features. It is set in the rural background he always deals with so well, and its protagonist is one of his good-hearted, sensible people who never fails to apply sound Middle American common sense to even the most outre mysteries. In this case, events begin when his dog, Bowser — one of Simak's patented country dogs — begins sporadically disappearing while on runs through the orchard, and reappearing with fresh dinosaur bones. Bowser has somehow become involved with an infrequently glimpsed "coon" which has been residing in the orchard longer than anyone can recall. The "coon" — who, Simak hints, may have been the model for Lewis Carroll's Chesire Cat — proves to be the sole survivor of a crash on prehistoric Earth. Quickly dubbed "Catface," the alien is in quasi-telepathic contact first with Bowser, then with Asa Steele, the protagonist, and is in fact a time-engineer.

Step by step, Asa finds himself involved in Big Business, as time-travelling becomes a commercial enterprise and more and more of his friends and acquaintainces become involved in marketing hunting trips into the age of the dinosaurs, and uncluttered real estate. Eventually, it becomes necessary for Asa and his lady to secede back into time and form the Republic of Mastodonia, rather than cope with the mounting hassles of bureaucracy. Finally, there is a denouement in which everyone's problem, including Catface's, is resolved.

This is good, solid, straight-line

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SF, done by an expert storyteller and well worth the reading. It does not offer anything fundamentally new to SF, but it contains excellent instances of what is attractive about traditional science fiction storytelling.

The Best of L. Sprague de Camp has been long overdue. These eighteen pieces by SF's most genuinely urbane individual cover the entire range of de Camp's short work in both fantasy and science fiction, wrapped-around by a Poul Anderson introduction and an afterword from de Camp himself. There are selections here from *Unknown* as well as F&SF, from *Astounding* and from *Flashing Swords*. The earliest copyright date is 1938, the latest 1976.

In these forty years of ornamenting SF, de Camp has established a reputation as a humorist and as a scholar. Quite capable of appreciating and writing rousing adventure tales, as his work in extending the *Conan* series demonstrates, he seems even more comfortable in modes which allow his brilliance and his intellect to show through.

The stories speak for themselves. Such perfect gems as "The Gnarly Man," "Nothing in The Rules," (about a mermaid in a swimming meet), and "A Gun for Dinosaur" (*vide* the Simak novel) are classics from which many subsequent stories by other writers have derived. Derivation — as distinguished from plagiarism, a far different thing — is the sincerest compliment that fellow practictitioners can bestow. Time after time, de Camp has created basic ideas which were obviously larger than his original setting, and whose development within the minds of other writers has given them a species of extended life, to the enrichment of the genre.

The term "writers' writer" applies to de Camp far more aptly than it does to most at whom the phrase is flung, and there is no clearer illustration of how beautifully this process works than in the comparison between "Gun for Dinosaur," which is perfect in its compass, and *Mastodonia*, which is a much broader story, with a different focus, that certainly would not have been written quite the way it is, or perhaps not written at all, if the de Camp story had not existed.

As if to underscore this process of cross-feeding, *The Best of de Camp* also contains his seminal essay, "Language for Time Travelers," which in 1938 created a permanent change in the way many time travel stories are written, or should be written.

But it's the fiction — the ingenuity and incidental decoration in "The Emperor's Fan," the snappy

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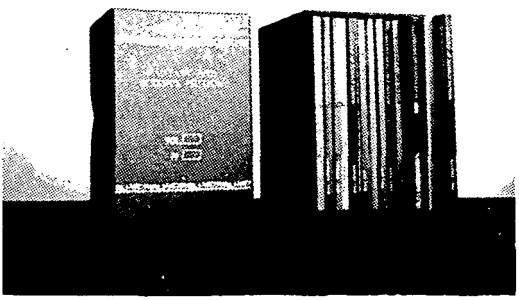
dialogue and the engaging characterization in "The Hardwood Pile," and then the mordant, relentless outcry of the protagonist in "Judgment Day" — that provide the essential thing, which is entertainment on a high level of intelligence. Against this, de Camp is fully capable of turning around and raising your eyebrows with the salty bounciness of his piece of dormitory doggerel, "The Ameba."

A various and witty man, an individual whose contributions to this world extend beyond SF, and, indeed, beyond the arts of any kind, de Camp is another one of those people who does good work and endures.

BOOK RECEIVED: *"...And Then We'll Get Him!"* by Gahan Wilson, Richard Marek Publishers, $12.95 hardcover, $4.95 soft. A new collection (his first in eight years) of prime Wilson cartoons. Many are from F&SF, of course, and many from other publications such as *Playboy, The New Yorker* and *National Lampoon.* Naturally and highly recommended.

—ELF



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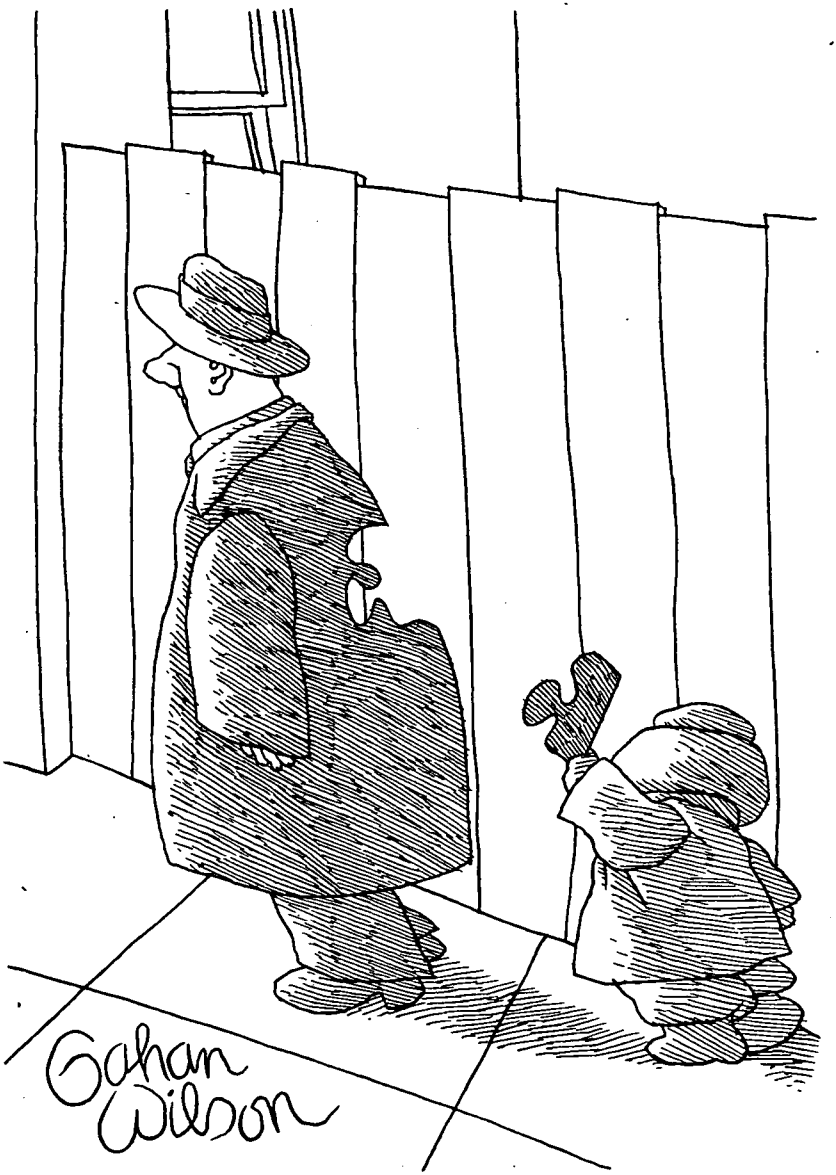

"HEY, MISTER!"

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A new story from Nebula award winner Charles Grant, about a time of ambition, anger and terror in the village of Oxrun Station . . .

Caesar, Now Be Still

by CHARLES L. GRANT

In the park at Oxrun Station there is a broad field that partially climbs the slope of what generosity can only call a hill, and to the right of the field beyond a screen of poplar and hickory, birch and elm is a pond. It's a small pond and clean, inhabited throughout most of the year primarily by a stray family of ducks that have never found their way clear to live anywhere else and by small children who negotiate the sometimes steep and slippery banks with an ease all adults covet and none dare try in the sight of any others. The cooling, squirming mud, the spiders that skate in darts and dashes across the unruffled surface, the bees that hover impatiently over the lily pad blossoms white and yellow are only a few parts of the whole, but parts those who have been tainted by maturity and the world avoid with a guilty squeamishness seldom admitted in the full light of the sun.

Myself, I prefer the gnarl humped roots of a storm-batter oak on the western, lowest ban There, when the weather and t inclination are right, I take r lunch and watch the ducks and t children until the coming co prods the former into reluctа migration and the latter are tran formed from the near-naked to t near-smothered in coats ar scarves and bright woolen ca pulled low and tight over ears ar eyes. When all that happens, I su render my solitude and stay in th *Station Herald* office, just c Mainland Road, a narrow highwa that passes Oxrun Station nor and south. I put my feet in bottom desk drawer, loosen my t with a most effective dramatic sig and leave bread crumbs on th blotter, or the papers thereon.

It was just into February by handful of days, then, when I wa preparing to take just such a brea

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from the rigors of working on a weekly newspaper. And I was alone. The editor, Abraham Elderby, was hiding somewhere with an Oxrun councilman; the only other reporter, Peter Baines, was burning in the Florida sun, and our two workhorse secretaries, Harriet and Flo, had taken themselves to the luncheonette several blocks away to get away from my pungent, and morbid, wit. It was only luck, then, that I stayed behind, because not five minutes into a cup of coffee and ham sandwich, Liz strode into the office and stood stiffly on the other side of the low wooden railing that served as a warning, and a symbol, to whatever public happened to drop by. I knew her too well to miss the fact that she had been crying. Her make-up was on the far side of perfect for such a lousy day in an already lousy month, and the way her hands grabbed at the air by her waist, I knew she was hoping it could be someone's neck.

"Hey, reporter," she said, her smile so forced I thought it would shatter, "how about taking me out to lunch?"

I glanced at the desk ahead of me, the two to my left, and tried to look apologetic. "I really should stick around and mind the shop, you know," But I was already kicking the drawer shut and stuffing my sandwich back into its familiar brown paper bag. As I did, I glanced over my shoulder to the back where Elderby's glass-walled office allowed him to play the watchdog whenever he bothered to show up. Since it was empty, and since I was champing, I grabbed for my topcoat and hat and took Liz's elbow before she bolted. She said nothing when I opened the door for her, and we were uncomfortably silent during the time it took us to walk down to the Chancellor Inn and our favorite hideout on the second floor of the converted farmhouse. Downstairs was a bar, restaurant and disco generally subdued during the middle of the day; upstairs was thickly carpeted and dimly lighted, with high-backed wooden booths lined in red leather scattered over the floor in a deliberately irregular pattern. They were large enough only for two in the room we chose, yet not so tight that knees brushed. Artemus Hall, the proprietor for at least a thousand years by my reckoning, greeted us with a sharp nod and took us immediately to a corner by the fieldstone fireplace where we shed our coats, ordered drinks and waited until the waitress had served and left with a grace that would put a cat to shame.

I lit a cigarette, handed it to Liz and waited patiently while she stared at the beamed ceiling, the fire, an invisible point directly over my head. She was neither buxom

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nor tall, and on that afternoon wore a severe tweed suit-and-skirt that matched perfectly her mood. Her glasses were dull, almost spinsterish, and she hadn't run a comb through her close-cut brown hair. I've never heard anyone call her beautiful, but then no one sees her the way I do — I find no faults in the way she looks.

"He's going to fire me," she said finally, when I refused to make light and refused to look sad.

"No, he won't," I said. "Mike hasn't the nerve."

She worked for Michael Yardley Jarrow, a lawyer whose office defines the word pretension. He was successful with the rich (who make up most of the families within and without the Station's sprawling limits) and moderately so with the rest of us who did not live in the small estates on the other side of the park. As such, then, he was automatically important — important enough to maintain a solid seat on the village council, a directorship at one of the banks, and a few dozen other things that kept him in silks and quiet elegance. He was also one of my oldest and most exasperating friends.

"I fouled up another brief," she said, brooking no arguments from a just-thirty and weary reporter. "He needed it for court this morning and I blew it. He almost slugged me he was so mad."

"Not Mike," I said, disbelieving. "The last time he hit someone was in grade school, and the kid belted him back so badly his teeth still haven't come in straight."

"Damnit, Simon, why do you insist on defending him?"

I opened my mouth to protest, saw the tears struggling to fade without falling, and cleared my throat instead. I thought I was trying to be rational and calming; obviously, I wasn't even in the same ballpark where Liz was playing.

"How come you blew it?" I said then. "Tired? You look it."

She held onto her glass tightly. Sipped. Swallowed. Stared at the fire again. "I didn't get much sleep," she admitted reluctantly. "That prowler was back. I stayed on the couch most of the night."

I didn't say anything, the most tactful thing I'd done in a week. She'd been bothered, off and on for a month or so, by someone she claimed was waiting outside her apartment door. The trouble was, each time she had the nerve to open it, no one was there, no sign, no . . . nothing. Elderby had complained of somewhat the same thing one day a week before, but I thought nothing of it until Forbes Cunningham was found dead in the park three days ago. Cunningham was, by all accounts, a miserable crank of a man who owned the most prosperous jewelry emporium in the vil-

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lage, one it was said Cartier would drool over. Sam Windsor, the police chief, let me see the body. Shriveled, hunched, as though he were a balloon and all the air had been sucked out through an undetectable hole. Once the word got around — and in Oxrun, where petty theft was the most heinous crime, word travels unbelievably fast — Liz became sure she was the next target. Nothing would dissuade her. Not even my staying over one night to prove to her she was letting her imagination work overtime and with triple pay.

"Did you call Sam?" I asked.

She shrugged. Liz wouldn't call the fire department if her apartment were worse than a furnace. Fiercely independent, and a woman determined to overcome her lack of formal education and climb to the top of her chosen heap with only the slightest assistance from anyone. Including myself.

"All right," I said. "We forget that part. Tell you what, I'll talk to Mike for you, okay? Come on, Liz, okay?"

She sniffed, grabbed a handkerchief from her purse and blew her nose. Acquiescence, then, and something Liz hated. She was, at times, too much her own woman, I thought, and often her pride inflated to the point of choking her. So she blew her nose. Sort of a private signal, and I relaxed.

Then she said she was hungry, and the storm, for the moment, was over.

For Liz. Not for me. After I had walked her back to her office and had trotted back to mine, I heard a faint grumbling whine filtering from the back room. I looked up and saw Elderby pawing at the intercom, glaring at me all the while and biting at his lips. I nodded and shot my cuffs as I headed back toward him, wondering what advertiser had complained this time, which councilman had whispered unkind words into his shell-like ear. He was like an apple baked too long and stuck atop a beanpole nibbled at through too many summers by ravenous vermin. His clothes were hung, not draped, and his left hand stayed at his throat, pulling at the wattles that quivered whenever he spoke.

"Simon, where the hell have you been?"

"Lunch," I said, my innocence role falling automatically into place.

"You were to stay in the office. You were to wait until one of the girls returned."

"A friend of mine —"

"I nearly lost an account because of that bit of selfishness."

"— was in trouble, and I wasn't about to turn her out."

"You're not listening to me."

"You, too."

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He stopped and stared at me while his right hand fumbled at a humidor to draw out a cigar no Cuban would be caught dead with; he lit it, blew the smoke toward my face and squinted. He was nervous, I could see it through the mask he liked to wear, but whatever sympathy he might have evoked was easily dissipated by his manner, and that whining voice of his.

"Damnit, Simon, are you in trouble again?"

The reference to my not-so-pious youth annoyed me, but I ignored it for the smoldering I saw beneath his expression. He went on, then, for nearly ten minutes, explaining as though I were a cub what my duties were and how I was to perform them with maximum efficiency, where my loyalties lay, and the location of my desk, not to mention the threats of unemployment fogged in words of seven syllables. At another time in another place I would have stalked out with righteous indignation cloaked about me, but I was irretrievably over thirty, reasonably secure; and with the marketplace becoming more and more jammed with hawkers much younger than I, I could take no chances on the temper of an old man.

There was also Liz.

And finally there was Oxrun Station. The village, the hills around it, the farmland, the . . . to say peace would be inadequate, to say unique would be clichéd; to say home, however, says everything.

So I listened, nodded contritely, and when it was over returned to my desk to work on the follow-up article on Forbes Cunningham. The coroner's inquest determined that the age of the man, the weather, and the amount of time he'd been exposed led to the condition of the discovered body. No explanation of why he was in the park, at night, in January, in the first place; that was the police's problem. Now it was February, and people forget. And my job was to make sure that they didn't. The article itself, then, carried nothing new. It was a filler, something to keep the oddity floating around the backs of folks' minds on page eight while the rest of Oxrun went about its business. If anything else ever came up, the transition back to page one would be painless, and years from now people would remember (or misremember) it always being there, for weeks on end, the scandal of the year, of the century.

When it was done, I considered asking Elderby about his prowler. Perhaps there was something in it, a link, Liz and Abraham and . . . whoever else might be affected. Afflicted. Whatever.

I turned around to stare through the glass wall at my boss. He was fiddling with the venetian

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blinds that cut him off from the world I lived in, saw me looking and pointed at the clock. Five. The bars were opened. The inmates were free. I glanced at the girls, working silently on something or other at Harriet's desk, shrugged and bid them a good night. They grunted. I laughed. Prowlers, Cunninghams, and angry advertisers: nothing changed, nothing changed.

I walked east two blocks to Fox Road, turned right another block, and I was at the corner of Fox and High, ascending the steps of a smallish Victorian much like the other homes in this part of the village. It belonged to the Smarts, a long-retired couple who had replaced their children with boarders. My rooms were on the top floor, complete with gabled study and slanted roof over the bedroom/sitting room, and a wind that howled when it thrust in from the north. I poked my head into the downstairs living room to see if anyone was about, then rushed up to change my clothes, wash, sit in an armchair rescued from one of Mrs. Smarts' spring clean-up campaigns. Because of my job I was permitted a phone of my own, and as soon as I was settled I called Mike, got his wife Grace (a fine and rising lawyer in her own right) and asked to be connected with the man himself. Grace hesitated for a moment, something that puzzled me, then did as I asked before I could question her.

"Simon, damnit, I'm working."

"Sure, Mike," I said, "but you'll never get to be President if you kill yourself first."

"Ha. Funny. So what's new? We still pokering Saturday night?"

I thought of the money I had lost at his cards over the years, and told him I would. "But now I want to talk to you about Liz, all right? You've got her scared to death, Mike. And, if you don't mind me saying so, you were rather tactless about it."

He was silent for several seconds, another puzzle, but I had no time to search for layers of interpretataion. "Listen, Simon," he said at last, "Liz is a nice girl. She works hard, works fairly well, but ... hell, she doesn't seem to fit, Simon. She's not what you call your typical law-office type, if you know what I mean."

It was my turn, then, to keep a moment's peace, shuffling through my stereotypes to see if I could come up with a law-office type. When I failed to do so, he bridled.

"Simon, I know you and Liz are . . . involved, but I'm going to let her go at the end of the month. Between you and me, of course. She'll find another job, don't worry, but ... damnit, Simon, why are you acting like her husband?"

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I almost laughed at his consternation, grunted instead, muttered a few words about the coming card game and rang off. I stared at the flowered wallpaper, at the corners, at the chipped desk of drawers where my life was stored. Then I slipped back into my coat and scarf and left the house, walking until I reached the park and passed through the huge iron gates to the winding paths that laced it. I followed one to the top of the hill. I didn't want my oak just then; it was too much bound with summer days and children's laughter. What I wanted, when I left the path and made my way through the trees and shrubs to the open, was the aloof iceprick of stars, the single grey cloud that smoked lazily beneath the moon, the lights of the village below and beyond me. I stood with my hands in my pockets, staring down the gentle slope that flattened into a playing field. The pond was to my left, but I still did not go there. Here and there, I could make out a chimney reaching whitely for the black above it. Cars with chains rattled distantly.

I had a brief, disturbing sense of not being alone, but it passed as quickly as it had come.

I looked, then, for omens.

I muttered speeches under my breath, scolding Liz and showing her a part of my shoulder for her cheek and the security it would promise if she would only cut loose one strand of her career and save some of her energy for me.

The feeling again, and I glanced back at the trees, at the black shadow-wall.

I paced through the snow less than an inch deep and looked at the marks I had left. You're following me, I told myself, and before I could respond, found myself standing at the edge of the pond in spite of my intentions. The ice was dark, unpleasantly so, and when I looked down at my feet I blinked rapidly. A face. Blurred and staring. I blinked again, and it was gone. For a third time, then, that not-alone sensation, and I hurried around the perimeter of the ice and through the trees to the fence. There was nothing there, I knew, and told myself it was the slush of February, the dreary grey days that stalked the end of winter.

Stalked.

I shuddered at the word and went home.

On Thursday, two days later, I had just approved the last of Harriet and Flo's paste-ups for the weekly edition, was pawing through some records of other bodies found in the park (four in the past eight years, all from out of town), when the door slammed open and Mike thundered in, slapping aside the gate in the railing, not stopping

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until he was standing in front of my desk. Except for a singular lack of hair on his body from the neck up, he was totally ursine, so much so in fact that in high school and college his nicknames were, respectively and predictably, Smokey and Grizzly; I used neither, I knew the man underneath. He was glaring at me in a manner too recently familiar for me to ignore, and his hands were poised over the oblong metal shade of my desk lamp as if he were ready to snap it in half. I didn't bother to smile. I only sat back in my chair and waited. While he opened his mouth, closed it again, swallowed and brushed his hands against his coat front, his sleeves. A forefinger rubbed against the side of his nose. He was steadying himself, and I did not like the sudden pit that had replaced my stomach.

"I had always assumed," he said finally, "that whatever we talk about, between ourselves, is a matter of confidence."

I frowned, and that seemed to make him madder.

"If I had known you were going to blow it, Simon, I would have kept my mouth shut. But you're my friend. I thought you had at least a little discretion."

"Mike," I said, palms to my chest, "I haven't the slightest idea what the hell you're talking about."

"You told Liz I was going to fire her."

"I most certainly did not."

Flo, working at the file cabinets, suddenly decided to visit the ladies' room. Harriet hunched herself over some papers on her desk. From where I sat I could see they were blank; she read them anyway. Carefully.

"She came in this morning, Simon, and told me . . . she came in and said that since I was going to let her go anyway, she was going to do me one better and quit. She threw — *threw, Simon* — a folder at my face and walked out. Damnit, I thought I could depend on you. I was hoping Liz and I could work out an amicable parting agreement so she wouldn't behave this way. You blew it, Simon. Damnit, you blew it!"

"Michael, in the first place I did not say anything to her except that I would talk to you when I had the chance. Which was going to be Saturday night at the game. In —"

"Forget it. I don't want you at my table."

"— the second place," and now my hands dropped into my lap, "even had I done it, it was my business to do so since you were going to can her anyway. And in the third damned place," I was on my feet, my palms resting on the desk, my face less than a foot from his, "what do you care? If she's not your type, as you said, why the hell are you so bothered?"

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"Because she'll talk," he said tightly. "Look, I've had little enough sleep these days, what with people sneaking around the house and scaring Grace half to death. I don't need the aggravation of a stupid angry woman blabbing half-truths around town. Who knows what people will listen to her?"

I closed my eyes as though that would deafen me, opened them again and sagged back into my seat. "Mike, you're not being rational. Lord, you can't be that insecure, not after all you've done, not after all this time."

"She'll talk, make up stories, lurid —"

"Stop it, Mike!" I snapped, slamming a hand on the armrest. "Liz isn't like that, and if nothing else, you should know that. She's mad, she quit, so get yourself another girl and forget it."

"She'll talk, Simon, and at this stage of my career, and Grace's, I won't have it."

"Oh Lord, I don't believe it. The next thing you'll be telling me, this town isn't big enough for the two of you."

"It isn't," he said. "And it's no thanks to you and your damned big mouth."

"I told you once I did not say anything. She knew it two days ago. I wonder why."

It was a staring match, then, until he jammed his hat back on his head and strode out. I was stunned into immobility. I could not allow myself to believe he was as confused as he seemed and could not understand why I was the brunt of his explosion. It wasn't rational, but then it wasn't a rational situation. And when the intercom crackled out my name angrily, I swept aside the papers on my desk and kicked back the chair. Then I spun around and pointed a finger at Harriet.

"Not a word," I said. "Not a goddamned word."

Prowlers and tantrums, I thought as I walked back to Elderby's sanctum and stood on the threshold; I really don't need any of this at all.

Elderby stood with hands clasped behind his back, staring out a curtained window at the tiny parking lot behind the building. He did not turn around when I cleared by throat.

"I warned you not to conduct your personal affairs on my time, Simon," he said. "I warned you. That is your business, on your time."

"Mr. Elderby, I didn't invite Michael in here. He —"

"Mr. Jarrow is a very important man in this town and in the state. It will not do either of us any good to have him mad at the paper."

"For God's sake, he's not mad at the paper, he's made at me!"

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"Mad at you and mad at the paper is the same thing. I'm going to have to think about making changes around here, perhaps. For the good of everyone."

I watched his fingers entwined nervously, frowned and shook my head. Everyone was nuts, I thought; what the hell's happening around here?

"Mr. Elderby," I said, placating and thinking of no checks coming in, "this is a weekly village newspaper. It is not the *New York Times*. You've got me and Peter and the girls. That's all, Mr. Elderby."

"I'm well aware of that," he answered, turning to face me with a neutral smile. "I am well aware of our position vis-a-vis the metropolitan dailies."

"Good, then what the hell —"

"But it will not stop me from being known, Simon, from having the influence I deserve."

"—are you talking about? Mike and I have argued before and we'll argue again. There's —"

"I will not be thwarted, Simon."

"—no big deal here, Mr. Elderby. No big deal."

"All right, then," he said blandly. "Smooth it over. I saw his face. This was not a little spat."

"Mr. Elderby...." I shut up.

"And the next time you disrupt your work for something like this, you won't be coming back to it. Do you understand me, Simon? You've upset the women, and they won't be worth a damn for the rest of the day. I'm upset, and I can't work for what I want when I'm upset. And you're upset and are now less than useless. Go home. Get drunk. I don't give a damn what you do, but don't come back here until I can have harmony in my kingdom, is that understood?"

I shrugged. I knew the strength of the enemy and my own resources. So I backed out, my hand on the doorknob. Before I could close the door, however, he lifted a folder from his desk and pointed it at me. "This article on the Cunningham thing, by the way . . . I pulled it. It stinks. And this memo about connections between him and those others over the past ten years? People die, Simon. Some in winter, some in summer. When Peter gets back I'll let him handle it."

I slammed the door.

Glared at Flo and Harriet huddled by the water cooler and walked out of the office, one arm still struggling to get into its coat sleeve.

Wandered.

Was not surprised when I found myself back at the pond where I searched for some trace of summer when everyone liked everyone else and the only worries I had were of filling the hours when I wasn't working, and courting, and sleep-

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ing, and dreaming.

The ice was dark, the ice was black, with mounds of snow turned to ice along the shallows, rough ridges where skates had thrown up shavings that had frozen where they'd sprayed. I shrugged off impatiently the feeling that something was hovering beyond me in the grey light, instead imagined myself in conversations with Mike, with Elderby, conversations that ended with verbal slashings, physical beatings, and myself committing the most monstrous acts against the life that animated them. I would move through one, finish and return to refine and polish, like a playwright laboring over the climactic confrontation between general and subordinate, emperor and vizier, lover and lover. And at each killing, in slow motion and mute, I grew more calm; and at each killing, I felt more ashamed.

I decided to straighten things out once and for all; I would talk to Liz, talk to Mike, they would part friends and keep me around for one more try. But by the time I had reached that conclusion, my face was stiff with cold, my ears had gone numb, my eyes heavy with an inordinate desire to lie down and take a nap.

I almost did.

Almost; and hurried back to partake of a bowl of Mrs. Smarts' beef broth. When I thought I might finally get warm again, I rushed upstairs and called Liz. No answer. Called Mike. No answer. Grinned at my fine intentions and read a book until I fell asleep in my chair.

The following morning the venetian blinds were drawn at Elderby's glass wall. Harriet was preening in front of a mirror propped on her desk. I perched on the edge of her desk and jerked my thumb toward the back.

"Hey," I said, "what's the idea?"

"He's afraid," she said, patting at her hair and smiling. "Says someone tried to break into his house last night. He thinks he was followed to work, too. Spent most of the time with Sam Windsor before he came here, demanding, if you will, around the clock police protection."

"You're kidding."

"Hey, would I kid you, Simon?"

She grinned, and I grinned back. I went to my desk and tried to call Mike, was told by his receptionist that he was not accepting any calls that day. When I prodded, and because she knew me through Liz, she told me he was awaiting instructions from Sam Windsor.

I didn't ask for what.

I stared at the receiver instead, and for the briefest of moments felt that not-alone sensation again. Suddenly, I raced from the office without telling Harriet where I was

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going. Without a car it took me twenty minutes to reach a colonial-styled two-story apartment building that housed fifteen small units. I looked up to the top left corner and saw that Liz's curtains were drawn. They shouldn't have been. In the lobby I tried to get her to answer the buzz that would unlock the main door, tried the back entrance, and it too was locked. There was an urgency I could not define, and I began to make the rounds of the places I thought she might be, including the pond she had shared with me on not a few warm spring nights. Then I went where she had no place being, trying to convince myself that she wouldn't leave Oxrun without at least a note for my eyes only.

I found her at the Chancellor Inn, upstairs in our booth, and I slid in silently, saying nothing when she ordered a larger-than-usual drink, the third, by the glasses that stood empty in front of her.

"You were at Mike's," I said simply, thinking she was also at Elderby's last night, her anger spilling over to encompass my own private fight.

"I wanted to do something," she said in a small, quiet voice. "And I couldn't think of doing anything but beating them, killing them even . . . I don't know." Her eyes were frightened, the lines etched from them like a web behind which she cowered. "Simon, am I crazy?"

"Silly," I said. "Just a little silly is all. I was mad, too, but I walked it off." I told her of my pantomimes in the park, and by the time I was done, she was smiling. Weakly, but smiling.

"You scared them out of their wits, you know." I said with a grin that banished condemnation.

"How did I do that?"

"By ... by whatever you did last night, dope," I said, lifting my glass in a silent toast. "Elderby's hiding in his office, and so is Mike. They're both trying to wheedle live-in cops from Sam."

"God almighty," she whispered and finished half her drink. "All I did was walk past the house a few ... Elderby? I wasn't there, Simon."

I almost let it pass, so intent on nudging her back to the Liz I wanted, but when the remark struck home, I made her repeat it, my doubt all too clear. "Come on, Liz, this is me, okay? What did you do, rap at their windows, throw some rocks at the door? What? Come on, I promise I won't print a thing."

I was wrong and too eager. I could see her wrapping her armor back on, strapping on her sword and marking off the combat zone. "I told you what I did and where I was, Simon. And for your information, I told it all to Sam this afternoon when he called me. Seems

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your 'friend' told him about the folder thing and wanted me investigated or something."

"Dumb," I muttered.

"I don't care," she said, startling me because I expected agreement. "Simon, I'm not going to be held down. Not by Jarrow, not by anyone." She didn't have to say whom that "anyone" included; it was evident by the way she turned abruptly to look at the fire. "Sam doesn't think I'm the housebreaker, anyway," she said after a log had cracked into a pyre of sparks. "He believed me when I told him about my own little sneak thief."

"Again? Liz, damnit —" I sputtered into silence, came close to pouting because she hadn't called on me for the hero's protection, but I did manage to get her to stay with me through dinner, which we scarcely tasted, and wrangled an invitation back to her place for what I hoped would be a reconciliation of sorts. I was sitting on the couch watching her pour the coffee when suddenly she stiffened, and some of the liquid slopped onto the carpet. I opened my mouth to ask if she were all right ... and grabbed at the edge of the cushion.

The pond. The park. The presence.

It was back, and all the more unnerving because it was obvious Liz sensed it too. A draught iced around my ankles. I would have sworn I heard a sigh sifting through the door.

February, I thought; it does things to people.

Liz rose, but I stopped her with a wave and threw back the bolt, snapped open the door and lunged into the corridor.

It was empty. Dim lights only, creating rather than dispelling the shadows.

And it was silent, all the more because of the murmurings of families who lived behind the other doors.

I turned, and she was standing in the middle of the room, hugging herself, her fingers massaging her biceps.

"A prank," I suggested.

"You felt it," she said. "It's real, then. My God, Simon, I didn't want it to be so real."

I walked to the sideboard to her telephone and dialed Elderby's number; I don't know why — a hunch perhaps, or something inside telling me things I did not want to hear. After eighteen rings, I broke the connection and tried for Mike. Grace answered, with an urgency that almost threw me.

"Hey," I said lightly, "what's up, Gracie? Can I talk to the man, or is he in conference?"

"Simon, get off the line! We're waiting for the police —" She was cut off abruptly, and it wasn't until

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I'd replaced the receiver that I ealized I had been hearing in the ›ackground the first climbing wail ›f a man ... screaming.

Liz stared at the door.

I stared at the telephone, fran-ically trying to make sense of what vas happening. I didn't hear what I hought I heard, I told myself; I lidn't hear it. It wasn't Mike.

But it was, and I snapped out of he stupor I'd fallen into and grab-›ed for my coat, Liz's arm, and ›olted from the apartment. It eemed like hours before the eleva-or came — wondering why in hell I iadn't used the stairs — but it was ·lose to that before I was able to get ier car to work. She seldom used it, more than her since I didn't have ›ne of my own, and it stalled four imes when I tried to race to the ›olice station. Four times. And not ›nce did Liz ask me a question, ›rod my thoughts, offer me some-hing more than the silence more :old than the air that fogged the vindshield.

When I finally parked at the :urb, she took my arm and looked it me steadily. I shuddered; there vas nothing in her eyes.

"Simon," she said, "I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry. We could have had t, you know. We could have had t."

"Later, Liz," I said, patting her iand and pulling her from the car. "We'll talk more later. Come on."

I pushed through the double doors, mostly a milky translucent glass, and hurried across the green-tiled waiting area to the low desk that squatted, much like my own, behind a wooden railing. A radio dispatcher was working his mike at the far wall, harried and cursing when static-filled responses filled the large room. Fred Berg was the man on duty at the desk, and he almost but not quite grinned when he saw and recognized me. I asked for Sam, was told he'd been summoned but hadn't come in yet.

"Look, Fred," I said, "I was just on the phone with Mike Jarrow. Something's wrong out there, I don't know what. I was talking with his wife when we were cut off. I think I heard someone yelling in the background."

Screaming.

"How long ago?"

I looked to the round clock on the wall over the dispatcher's head. "Twenty minutes, maybe. I had car trouble."

He rubbed a hand through what was left of his hair and slammed a pen into its holder. "Forget it, then," he said wearily. "Look, Simon ... damnit, man, why the hell did you have to come here? Now, of all times?"

"Hey, Fred," I said, leaning closer and staring, "come on, Fred, what?"

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He sniffed, looked down at his log book, then up and away to the white globes of light suspended on dark chains from the faintly green ceiling.

"Ah, God," I said, grabbed for a wooden chair and slumped into it. "Damn." And when I finally looked around to tell Liz what Fred's silence had told me, she was gone. The doors were open, and letting in the cold.

I wanted to go after her, but I couldn't. My legs wouldn't work and my weight had grown too great. I would go to the apartment later and explain, perhaps comfort and work things out. Right now, however, I had shock to fight through and mourning to work on. I was so close, I thought; Liz was right in my hand.

I told Fred, then, to check on Elderby. I was told they already had. Everyone, in fact, who had reported a prowler that Sam had been disposed to pass off as a prank.

Half an hour later the patrols were back in for a quick debriefing, and I didn't like what I heard. Mike had been found in the shower, the water wrinkling his skin until he'd seemed to have aged a hundred years; Grace was on the front yard, half-buried in a bank of snow. Elderby was in his bed, an unused rifle at his side.

Everyone assumed that since I was the only reporter left to cover things, I'd stick around for all the details. I didn't. I left and headed for Liz's apartment, needing her then and wanting to know what it was we could have had, and now could not. But when I got there, she was gone, and suddenly I was frightened and furious at myself for allowing my mind to forget her even for an instant. I borrowed her landlord's car and drove the streets aimlessly, searching for signs of her, spoors, a trace in the air, and saw her car in the middle of the road in front of the park.

Like a madman I ran through the entrance and angled to my right, cutting across the lower field and into the stand of trees. It was dark, too dark, and too often I fell over things invisible, my hands snapping out to catch me, skidding on the snow-frozen ground and burning from the contact. A low branch caught me on the hip and I was spun into a bush more thorn then twig. I cried out and ran again, ignoring the stinging on my face, the shallow gasp of my lungs. And when I broke into the open, I held onto my oak for support and stared. Knowing then what it was all about.

She was already standing in the center of the pond, looking down at the ice, looking up, looking down. She wore no coat, no gloves, and i

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was then that I felt the presence again; heavier now and more threatening, spiraling up from the ice with a faintly crimson glow that allowed me to see everything through a helpless squint. She was looking down again, to where I had seen that face. The death mask beneath the ice, eyeless and grim.

I called out but she didn't, or couldn't, turn round; and I cried out when the first small flakes drifted down from the black.

If I were a scholar I could quote and expound upon the wisdoms willed to us by the masters not always lamented, wisdoms covering ambition's thrust, ambition's force, and the accompanying curse that goes with the territory. But ... none of us believe in curses or epigrams or quotes from the masters. Not any more. We've withdrawn into a shell not of sophistication born of learning, but of fear born of knowing. Fear that we will be found out and destroyed, or exposed, if one is much different than the other.

And the man who would have been a king had demurred and so lost a kingdom, brutally and bloodily; but the ambition, *not the justice,* of his, for want of a better word, life-force keeps him wandering. Caesar, clearing that endless battlefield not of his murderers, for they had done that themselves, but of his rivals. At least that's the way it was in Oxrun that night in February and on all those other nights when some men dared dream of things not theirs. And those who had allowed themselves to be open to the weapons of anger and hatred combined into cornered rage had been weakened to the point of vulnerability.

All of them.

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And when their ambitions were drained ... .

So I stood and I watched.

There was nothing I could do for my Liz right now. She knew, had known all along, and had resigned herself to the embrace of the figure that seemed to have grown from a single crimson flake, gathering others about it until it lifted from the midnight ice and loomed man-tall, man angry, man ambitious. If she had time to scream before he kissed her, I did not hear it — the wind did it for her; if she had time to look at me once before the end, I did not see it — the snow lashed at my face unbowed and staring.

No one will believe it, however; it's too ... well, take my word for it, no one will believe it, not even the important visitors I'll be meeting at the train whenever I can.

But that's not the worst part, that's not what turns my summers into December, my dawns to sunsets, my pond to dust.

The worst part is that I'm safe from it all. I know it. And *he* knows it. No matter what the pretension that filters into my work, I am an ordinary man and will be nothing more.

I am no threat to anyone, least of all him.

I'm alone in the dark, in the snow, in the park.

It's over, then, Caesar, at least for now. Be still, and let me go home.

I have work to do.

Not that it matters.

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A neat twist on a classic sf theme, immortality, from Reid Collins, who has been a news correspondent for the CBS network for the past ten years.

The Book Keeper

by REID COLLINS

A great anvil cloud arose in the west at midafternoon. It stood for a time in rose-gold relief and then moved eastward, drenching the hill country, and at nightfall it remained a shattered shroud in the darkening east.

It had thrown cool water spiced with hail into the pounded earth of the prison yard. Yellow globulets still stood against the window panes of a small room overlooking the mini-theater. In the engine rooms a dynamo was whirring to a lower pitch, and the physician at the side of the stage was poised to advance again.

"Tough monkey," said the warden.

Ranger Ben Phillips grunted assent, and shifted his bulk in the hard oak chair, holster hooking in the back.

Below them in a row of chairs in the mini-theater sat the witnesses and reporters. Only one had had to leave. A young reporter for the *Chronicle* had exited swiftly when the dynamo crested the first time and the figure in the chair center-stage arched as if to form a straight line for the current. Twice, the physician had advanced, listened, and bade the process begin again.

Now, as the sound ceased and the wheel at stage-right was returned to its detente position, the physician advanced again, took a reading, waited, reconfirmed, and said something.

The witnesses in the row of chairs below stood quickly, some, the reporters among them, still working at their note pads. A deputy's voice rang in the theater: "You'll sign the witness affidavits next-door and receive your checks there."

From the small room, Ranger Phillips continued to watch as three attendants began unhooking the remains of Chuckie Busby from the

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electric chair and placing them in a canvas.

Suddenly, the deputy was at the door. "They're here, warden."

In swept the two surviving Busby brothers and Miss Marvel Rupp. They acknowledged Phillips by ignoring him, and Marvel demanded of the warden the remains of Chuckie Busby.

"Got the papers here," said the warden, rising with studied sloth from the desk. "Here someplace."

"Fast," hissed the smaller Busby, and he shot a glance at the ranger to make certain he could issue orders here. "It's legal. We have identification and we want Chuckie, fast."

The warden riffled the papers, blue and pink and green. "What's the hurry, folks? The deceased isn't even cool yet."

The Busby brothers advanced on the desk. Marvel eyed Phillips and said, "It's all legal and we want him now."

The warden looked at Phillips and the ranger nodded. "It's their wish," he said, "and of course, they are the next of kin."

They hurried from the room clutching their copies.

"In the back," called the warden after them. They had disappeared into the prison yard.

"Think it'll work?" asked the warden.

"Don't have the first i-dea," said the ranger. "They got a doctor from Chicago out here, and an ambulance chock full of stuff, batteries and rheostats. And there's nothin' to say they can't try."

"But what if that crap works?"

"God knows. Then we got a legal problem." The ranger added, going out the door, "An' a law problem."

The *Chronicle* man, who had left before the last howls of the dynamo, was standing in the hall, recovered but pale in the yellow bulb light.

"Officer Phillips?"

"Gotta hurry, son."

The young man trailed him down the hall. "I missed most of that back there, in the theater, that is. But those people just out of that room, they were the Busby brothers and the girlfriend, weren't they? They claiming him?"

Phillips grunted as they got to the door.

"What's the big hurry, then? He's gone, isn't he?"

Phillips turned partway. "Signed, pronounced, and certified. Well, you were a witness weren't you? Didn't you get your check?"

"No. I — I wouldn't do that. It wouldn't be — you know."

"Well," said the ranger, "he was sorta dead twice back there, even though you missed the finale."

Chill air, filtered through ten tons of hail falling somewhere, hit

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them at the door, and they made their way across the puddled yard and into the back holding room.

"Gone?" Phillips asked.

"Gone," said the deputy. "Took off like a scalded rat." Out on the flat the tail lights of the ambulance fishtailed through the wallows of the prison road.

At the car, Phillips said only, "You'll be on your own, son, and if anybody asks, I'll deny it, and so will you, if you're able." With that, they slid down the road in the ranger's Chevrolet in pursuit of the winking lights.

The *Chronicle* man scratched at his pad as the car lurched in the clay and Phillips made great arcs of correction with the wheel to keep the Chevy in the wavering tracks. "You ain't writin' this, are you?"

"No, sir, I'm playing catch-up, with the part I missed back there."

Reaching the macadam, the ambulance sped up and threw shards of mud down the highway, but with its shaved engine head and special-ratio gear box and rear end, the Chevy soon caught up and settled in 50 feet behind.

Phillips twisted the ivory handle of the spotlight drilled through the door frame. "When I hit the back with the spot," he said, "look inside." He flicked the switch. A cone of light struck the back of the ambulance.

Inside, they could see an attendant's white coat holding something near the ceiling. Tubes and wires dangled down in a ganglia that centered on the cot and a hint of grey canvas. Suddenly, a hand shot back and jerked the rear door curtains.

They sped on in tandem.

"They are actually going to, to bring him back?"

"Try," said Phillips.

"Well, can they?"

"Don't know. They got a fancy MD from Chicago, supposed to know a lot of tricks. It's 1937, son, and the world of medical science has come a long way."

"Yeah, you saw that at the Chicago World's Fair. And as long as he isn't busted up or anything, who knows? They say the whole thing runs on electricity anyway."

For an hour they traveled the soaking land, meeting perhaps two other cars, until the ambulance began to slow. The lights of a diner shone on the flat, and the ambulance turned in.

Phillips followed and positioned the Chevy in a wingman's slot, poised to pursue whichever way the ambulance might leave the parking lot.

After five minutes, the passenger door opened. The white-coated attendant and Marvel Rupp left the ambulance and trudged into the diner.

Phillips waited.

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The smaller Busby left the ambulance and he too went inside.

"C'mon," said the ranger. "But, remember, you're not really here."

They drank coffee from heavy mugs, the ranger seated next to Marvel and the *Chronicle* man next to the attendant, the smaller Busby in the middle. *The Isle of Capri* scratched on the Seeburg in the corner and the *Chronicle* man whispered to the attendant, "Doin' any good?"

They were young, about the same age. The attendant lisped into his mug, "Almost, there, for a while. But," and he shrugged.

Down the counter, Marvel Rupp asked the ranger, "The kid a cop, too?"

Phillips looked at her steadily. "Hitchhiker."

She snickered, "Thought that was against the law."

"Not yet. Hasn't passed both houses. Lotsa stuff is a grey area right now." He sipped the boiling coffee and asked suddenly, "Doin' any good?"

Busby the smaller shifted on the center stool. "What's it to ya?"

The attendant took advantage of the diversion and whispered to the *Chronicle* man, "There was re-respiration after we applied the shock. We I-V'd enough adrenalin to win a horse race. But, it just stopped."

"What're you tellin' him?" Busby the smaller demanded and spun to glare at the attendant. "I'll wear you out."

Phillips arched his back. "Tell your friend, Miss Rupp, about creating a public disturbance."

"Public, shit," she said. "There's no public hereabouts for 90 miles. This is the ass hole of creation."

Ranger Phillips said simply, "You are speaking of Central Texas."

The door squeaked. It was the physician, his slicker wet with the first drops of more rain. He looked at the counter uncertainly, his clients bracketed by strangers, and then he carefully selected a stool at the side of the law.

"Evening," offered Phillips.

"Officer," the doctor nodded.

"A long house call," said Phillips.

The doctor drank in silence. "Yes," he said, finally, "but it is our oath."

"We all take one," said Phillips.

The door collided with its stop, and it was the elder Busby shouting, "Come quick! Doc, goddamn it, come!"

The doctor shot from the stool and into the rain. The attendant and Busby the smaller followed. Marvel Rupp turned on her stool and stared out the open door.

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"Well, ain't you gonna go see, and say 'hello?'" asked Phillips.

"Jesus," she said.

"It'll be like ol' times, won't it?" said the ranger. "Well, maybe a little cooler than before. A little different, an' stranger."

She whispered, "Shut the hell up," but her mouth didn't close when she finished.

The white-coated attendant came through the open door, wiping rain from his face with both hands. He reached for his coffee.

"It wasn't *that,*" he said. "It wasn't that at all. The doctor is out there explaining about — things. How muscles finally let go and all. He's having to convince that Mr. Busby, though."

Marvel Rupp had turned to the counter. Her marcelled head shook silently in the fox ruff of her coat. Ranger Phillips put a large hand on her shoulder, patted it, and twice he said, "Jus' thank the Lord."

The Chevy hummed northward, and the ranger said, "You can prob'ly get a good phone line in Waco, file something with 'em, and still catch a bus back in time to save your job."

"Chances are," said the *Chronicle* man. "There's one thing. Off the record. What would you have done?"

"Taken him."

"Arrested? But if he's been pronounced, certified, then he's fulfilled the sentence."

Phillips reached inside his jacket and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "These, now. These are warrants. Shreveport, armed robbery; Winfield, Kansas, assault with intent; and two still outstanding here in Texas for the Lampassas Bank."

"So, you'd have taken him on those?"

"Him, it or whatever."

"Still, it almost seems like he'd have king's X. As though taking it that far, there'd be some, some bar to —"

"Some statute of grave limitations?"

"Yes. Something like that."

"I thought about it. Like the ride on Ol' Sparky had ought to wipe the slate, maybe. But that's for somebody else to figure. Don't matter to me where he's been, Mexico or Cuba, Peru or purgatory. I keep the books this side.

"There's Waco up ahead."

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R. Faraday Nelson's first story for F&SF in many years is a totally engrossing historical fantasy about a Roman soldier and his encounter with a "blue man." Mr. Nelson's most recent sf novel is Blake's Progress; *others include* The Ecolog, Then Beggars Could Ride, *and (with Philip Dick)* The Ganymede Takeover.

Nightfall On The Dead Sea

by R. FARADAY NELSON

Vespasian's good son reigned little more than two years before he died, some say of poison, and Vespasian's evil son became Emperor of all the Roman Empire.

Even the gods protested, and Jupiter opened the heavens and poured out rain and lightning on the city of Rome for weeks without a break. During this storm an elderly retired centurion named Gaius Hesperian, partly to escape the weather and partly to escape the murderous whims of the new ruler, found shelter in a modest villa near the Tiber River, along the highway between Rome and the Port of Ostia.

In the evenings fat Marius, whose business affairs had obliged him to spend his entire life within a day's drive of this villa, insisted on having couches set out on a sheltered porch overlooking his courtyard, and there he would eagerly question his guest about battles and barbarians and kings and princesses, and about the strange cults and superstitions prevailing in the distant lands at the rim of Rome's dominions.

Every night the same ritual would be repeated. Marius, in toga and tunic, would waddle excitedly about, urging the slaves to hasten and clear away the remains of supper and set out the couches on the porch.

A slave would ask, "What wine, master?"

And Marius would say, "Only the finest and oldest Falernian for my honored guest!"

And when the couches and a low table, on which was placed two goblets and a slender amphora of red wine, were set out, Marius would lead the old soldier to the porch and say, "Here! A little wine? A bit of good conversation before bed?"

Then Gaius Hesperian would

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sigh and nod and remove his helmet (for he still wore helmet, cape and armor, more from habit than necessity) and bow slightly, so that Marius could see the lamplight flicker on his bald head, and recline on the couch across from his host, resting his weight on his elbow, his still-muscular arm bulging.

The two men would watch the rain in the courtyard garden for a while, drinking their wine slowly, unmixed with water, for they both agreed that Falernian was too fine a wine to be watered, and for a long time neither man would speak.

It was always Marius who broke the silence. "Did you ever see the beautiful Princess Berenice of Judea?" or, "Do the Britons really paint themselves blue?" or, "The Black Nations to the south — are they any match for our legions in battle?"

And Hesperian would clear his throat and answer yes or no or perhaps and begin another story, for the old soldier had seen many things and spoke well, in a deep, rough, but resonant voice.

Then one night, after the silence had run longer than ever before and Marius was shifting uncomfortably, Hesperian said softly, "It's colder than usual tonight. Perhaps it would be better if we did not talk."

It was actually quite warm in spite of the rain, but Marius did not wish to be impolite. "Slaves!" he called. "Bring us a brazier of hot coals!" They hastened to do his bidding.

Hesperian smiled. "Can't do without your bedtime story, eh, Marius?"

Marius nodded sheepishly. "How else can I learn about that great wide world?" he demanded with an expansive gesture. "That world I can never see for myself?"

"But I'm afraid you've pumped me dry. There's no more to tell. You've heard it all."

Marius' dismay was only temporary. "Not so, Gaius! What about that incident at the Dead Sea? You've often mentioned it — even been on the brink of telling me about it — but then you always changed the subject."

The centurion frowned. "Allow me to let that one story remain untold."

"No, no! I can tell by the way you speak of it that it must be something strange, something more fascinating than any tale of mere warfare and political intrigue. You must tell me that story, even if you never tell me another!"

"Marius, you don't understand. You live so near Rome, where one city leaves off around here, another begins. In all your life, I doubt if you've ever been for one minute in a place where, if you called for help, someone would not answer. It's a

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safe world, a world where you can feel secure. You'll be happier, better off, if you go on thinking all the world is like that."

"No, Gaius! I'm not happy, only bored! Tell me! Tell me about the Dead Sea!"

Hesperian raised his goblet and drank deep, then set it down and wiped his thin lips with his wrist. "Very well, Marius. I see you will not let me rest until you've heard it. I told you, did I not, that I once served in the Eastern Legions, near the Jewish temple city of Jerusalem?"

"Yes! Yes! Go on!"

I was young then and not yet a centurion. I commanded a troop of eight regular legionaries stationed in Bethany, just east of Jerusalem. There were those eight men, myself, and my clerk, Charon ... ten Romans in all, left there to maintain order in a population of several hundred Jews and Greeks. The Jews and Greeks hated each other almost more than they hated us Romans. So I was regularly forced to investigate cases of violence and murder. It was cold comfort when my commanding officer, in one of his infrequent visits, told me I should be glad the Greeks and Jews were at each other's throats, because if they ever joined forces they would certainly have no trouble slaughtering our tiny band.

When I remember Bethany I get an overpowering impression of white. The buildings were all white, white and square and crude, without ornamentation. The land was white, bleached white and without a trace of grass, though there were a few palm trees inside the town. Even the sky was white, or so it sometimes seemed because of the blinding brightness of the sun. It was a special kind of white, I think — the white of dry bones, of a skull from which all trace of flesh has long since decayed away.

My troops, my clerk and myself, together with two horses and one donkey, lived in a single small barracks on the edge of town, and it was there, at a makeshift table in a dusty courtyard, that I dispensed Roman justice every day of the week except the Jewish Sabbath.

As I say, the majority of the cases were of violence between the Jews and Greeks, usually violence against property but occasionally violence against persons — murder, fistfights, minor riots. Somehow, in spite of the heat and the hatred that made our lives like a never-ending fever dream, we dealt with it all, at least until that evening — I think it was in autumn, though all the seasons seemed alike to me there — when, all the pending cases disposed of one way or another, I adjourned the court and, together with Charon, was gather-

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ing up my scrolls. Suddenly I heard the hysterical scream of a little girl and looked up to see a Jewish child in a torn and dirty tunic running toward me across the courtyard, bare feet flying and long black hair streaming behind her.

"Officer! Officer! Come quick!"

Charon caught her before she reached me and tried to hold her struggling little body. "Tomorrow, child. Tomorrow," he told her sternly.

"No! No! You must come now! It's my grandmother!" She burst into tears. "Now! Now!"

I could have sent a soldier with her to investigate, but court was over for the day, and I felt the need of a little exercise. "Let her go, Charon," I said, and the child, the moment she was free, dashed up to me and began tugging at my hand in a frenzy.

I let her lead me out of the front gate of the courtyard, while Charon, tall, gaunt and disapproving, followed after us.

"Calm down, child," I said as we hurried through the streets, our long shadows moving ahead of us. "Calm down and tell me what's wrong."

At first I couldn't understand a word of her broken babbling, but finally I made out "The blue man. The blue man."

"What blue man?"

"Grandma and I were walking — at the other end of the village. We'd been shopping. We had bread and cheese and wine. I noticed a shadow. Someone was following us." She stopped, her almost-black eyes round with remembered terror. "I warned Grandma."

"Go on," I prompted.

"We walked faster. He walked faster. We began to run. He came after us. He was too fast for Grandma. He caught up to her, tore the food out of her hands!"

"What did he look like?"

"I told you! He was blue. His skin was all over blue!" She looked as if she was on the verge of vomiting.

"Might be someone with leprosy," commented Charon.

"No!" she cried angrily. "A leper is white. This man was *blue*."

"Easy, child," I said softly. "What happened next?"

"He ran away. And Grandma ... Grandma ...."

We turned a corner.

"There she is! You see?" she cried, pointing.

The old woman lay in a crumpled heap in the dust.

It was obvious she was dead, but I tried her pulse anyway, then examined her quickly in the failing evening light, trying to determine the cause of death. Neither then nor later could we find a mark on her.

"I don't understand," I said, standing up.

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"Look at her face," said Charon.

The old woman's face was horribly contorted. It seemed impossible that a mere human face could show such terror. Wasn't that a mask? A mask carved by some master sculptor for some Greek horror play? No, it was real. The bulging eyes, the lips drawn back from the toothless mouth, the maze of tortured, twisted brown flesh; it was all real.

"Her heart, perhaps," I said.

He nodded. "Perhaps."

"Sometimes, when an old person sees something frightening ...."

"I've seen fear before, sir, but not like that. What did she see? What *could* she have seen?"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

I was curious.

I asked questions, alerted the troops before their tours of guard duty to be on the watch for a "blue man," even though I could tell it was only the strictness of Roman discipline that prevented them from laughing in my face.

"You're spending too much time on the blue-man thing," said Charon finally. "Old women die all the time. There are other, more important matters needing your attention."

"Perhaps you're right," I sighed.

But one week later I visited the little girl at her home, hoping to get from her a more complete description or some explanation of what she meant by a "blue man."

Her mother met me at the door of their poor dwelling. "I want to talk to your daughter," I said.

"I hope you can," she answered listlessly.

She led me into the dark interior, and when I saw the little girl sitting at the table, motionless, her eyes blank and unfocused, I understood what her mother meant.

"Do you remember me, child?" I asked.

She did not answer.

"She never speaks now," said the mother. "Not a sound. At night though — sometimes — she screams in her sleep."

I tried again to speak to the little girl, but it was useless. Those round dark eyes were looking at something else, something quite invisible to me ... perhaps a man with a blue skin.

For a while we got other reports of a strange man, always alone, who stole chickens, raided kitchens, even rooted around in garbage, but nobody else got a good look at him. He now appeared only at night, one shadow among many, for Bethany was very poorly lit. Charon pointed out that it was not certain that this was the same man who was supposed to have the blue skin and per-

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haps there was more than one man.

The only clue of any kind that came in during this period was a bit of cloth a merchant claimed to have torn from the cloak of the thief.

It was ordinary wool, dyed blue, but the merchant, who dealt in spices and perfume, claimed that it proved our thief was, in addition to his other crimes, also a grave robber.

"He steals from the dead as well as the living," insisted the bearded little Arab.

"How do you know?" I asked him ... it was during one of those sessions at the table in the courtyard.

"Smell it!" he said triumphantly.

I sniffed the bit of cloth. It did have an odd aroma.

"You see, sir?" he said. "There are certain oils and spices that are used only to anoint a dead body. It's my business to know them, sir, by the smell. I tell you, sir, there's no doubt in my mind. That bit of wool came from the clothing of a corpse!"

Then, abruptly, the crimes ceased.

When I kept up my questioning and my admonitions to the men on watch, Charon chided me. "You seem unhappy that our thief has given up his life of crime."

"How can we be sure he's given it up?" I asked, annoyed. "He may be waiting, waiting for a chance to do something worse."

"Or," Charon pointed out with a grin, "he may have gone somewhere else" — he chuckled — "out of your jurisdiction."

Other cases came up, claiming my attention.

There was a band of Jewish highway robbers who called themselves an army of liberation.

There were some religious fanatics who went out into the desert to meet an angel and starved to death.

There was a gang of child cutpurses traveling with a Greek musician and his dancers.

And a woman turned up whom I'd known before, a woman who'd done some spying for us when she was younger but who, now that she'd lost her looks, had become very religious. She still painted her lips, and I couldn't blame her. They'd made her a small fortune. We'd paid her for the words those lips spoke; her victims had paid for her kisses.

Miriam Redhead, we'd called her, and we still called her Redhead now that her hair had all turned gray.

She'd come before me during the regular court session, and I didn't recognize her, what with the weight she'd put on and the way her hair had turned gray, but she recognized me.

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"Gaius!" she cried.

"Do you know me, woman?"

"Of course. There's many a secret I whispered into those handsome Roman ears of yours, back when I was called Redhead!"

Even then I didn't recognize her.

It was only after the day's session was over that it all came back to me. She'd had a child. She'd said it was mine — and perhaps it was. I'd arranged for the child to be granted Roman citizenship and be adopted by a Roman family, though the parentage could never be established for certain.

The following morning she met me at the gates of our courtyard, where, as the guard later informed me, she'd been waiting for me for hours.

"There's no court today," I told her. "It's the Sabbath."

"I observe the Sabbath better than most these days," she said, fingering the white linen shawl she had over her head. "But this is a family matter."

"Does that make a difference? I know nothing of Jewish law."

"Some men spend a lifetime studying it and still do not know it all. So there's no shame if you are ignorant. But you remember me now, don't you?"

"Yes, Redhead. I was only a common soldier then, and you were...."

"I know what I was. And what have you been doing since then?"

"I've been posted to Spain, to Britain, and now back here. And you?"

She shrugged, standing barefoot in the dust with the white sun beating down on her, raising beads of sweat on her forehead. "I've found a great peace and — a great trouble." She glanced at me sharply and I saw that her glittering green eyes, at least, had not grown old. "You remember my brother?"

"I remember you had a sister."

"I had a brother too, older than me. Don't you remember him either?"

"Wait. Yes. I remember him now."

"He's lost, wandered away. I'm searching for him. Have you noticed any strangers? Someone who looked — a little familiar to you?"

I searched my memory, then shook my head.

"Please," she begged. "Try to remember. He's not like he was. You might not recognize him. He's — *changed.*"

"Changed? In what way?"

There was a long silence, then she whispered, "I can't tell you that." She gave me a look of hopelessness, then turned to shuffle away.

"Are you sure he's still alive?" I called after her.

She glanced back at me, and

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there was a faint, strange, ironic smile on her lips. "Oh, yes, Gaius. That's the one thing I am absolutely sure of."

Every day for six days she came to question me about her missing brother, waiting her turn patiently with the other Jews and Greeks and Arabs who came to place their fates in my hands, but each time I could tell her nothing.

The Sabbath came again, and again she met me at the gate, and we talked, there in the blazing sun. I'd begun to feel easier with her, when an odd thought entered my head and I asked her, "Did you say your brother has changed?"

"Yes."

"Does he have — a blue skin?"

There was a long silence, then she said, "So he *is* here. And you kept it from me!"

"No, no, don't misunderstand. It's only this minute that your brother and this man with the blue skin came together in my mind. We've had a mystery around here, and now, thanks to you, we may be able to solve it. Someone with a blue skin has been seen in the area, stealing things, hiding in the shadows...."

"Where is he now?" she broke in. Her green eyes had suddenly come alive with a disquieting glitter, so that she looked almost insane.

"I don't know. I've had no new reports about him for months."

She turned away, her painted lips a grim line. "So he's gone, moved on."

She walked briskly away, her fat bare feet kicking up little puffs of white dust.

"Wait!" I called after her. "I have some questions to ask you!"

When she paid no attention, I let her go, thinking I could have one of my men drop around to the town's one inn and arrest her before the day was out. It was there I made a mistake. When my soldier arrived at her lodgings, he found she'd left, in spite of the Jewish prohibition against traveling on a Sabbath. The innkeeper claimed she'd joined an Arab camel caravan headed east, to the Essene monastery at Qumran, on the shore of the Dead Sea.

When I heard this, I turned to Charon and said, "Let's saddle up and go after her!"

Charon, however, pointed out that she was now outside my jurisdiction and that anyway a lost brother was not an important enough matter for me to postpone my regular sessions of court. I had to admit, very reluctantly, that he was right.

A week and a half later a mounted courier arrived from Qumran with the news that, I felt,

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gave me the excuse I needed for action.

The blue man had been seen along the shores of the Dead Sea in broad daylight. A monk had pursued him, while three other monks looked on, and had evidently trapped the stranger in one of the dead-end canyons or gullies that clefted the mountainous cliffs behind the monastery.

The three onlookers had watched the pursuit until it was out of sight and only became alarmed when, after a half an hour, their brother monk did not return.

They went looking for him.

And they found him.

His head had been torn from his body ... not cut, as by sword or ax, but torn, twisted off as if by some being of far more than human strength.

This time, when I commanded Charon to have our horses saddled, he had no arguments to offer, and within the hour we two were galloping east into the shimmering white wilderness of tortured boulders and huge grotesque hills sculpted by the wind into a thousand nightmare shapes, a wilderness where you could ride for hours without seeing a single spot of green.

We camped by the road that night; it would be all too easy to wander off the road and never find our way to anything but death, the following day, by sunstroke.

I looked out over the Dead Sea.

It was as flat as a marble floor; not a ripple disturbed its pale gray surface, and from that motionless water arose a frightful, somehow terrifying stench, unlike anything I'd ever smelled before ... except, yes, there had been a time in Rome ... I'd tried to forget it ... when I'd seen a man covered with tar and burned alive. That was it! That was where I'd smelled that hideous smell before.

The monks had seen us coming from afar, and four of them ran out to greet us as we approached their low, plain buildings.

They took the bridles of our horses and led us to their stables. As I dismounted, one of them said in a low voice, "The woman is here. I think she wishes to speak with you."

"The woman?"

I followed him into the dim interior of one of the buildings, into a hall where, from the look of the tables, the monks ate their communal meals. There stood Redhead, pale, staring, with a monk's robe draped around her pudgy body.

"Your brother ... he's killed a man," I began, setting down my shield.

"They shouldn't have chased him," she whispered.

"Be that as it may, things are serious now. You must tell me all

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bout it, explain what's going on ere."

"I'll tell you nothing until I ave your word as a Roman officer hat you won't go after him."

"I can't do that. You know I an't. He's a murderer. He must be rought to trial. Then, if there are xtenuating circumstances ...."

"Gaius, forget for a moment hat you're a Roman soldier. Let ne talk to you as a man. I can tell ou a secret, the greatest secret of ll."

"I am a Roman soldier and I an never forget it."

"Not even for the secret of im-nortality?"

There was a long pause before I aid softly, "There is no secret of mmortality."

"Oh, no? When that poor dead nonk was found, he was clutching omething in his hand. I saw it vhen the body was brought in, and vhen nobody was looking, I took t."

She produced, from inside her oluminous robes, a small object vrapped in a white scarf. Carefully he unwrapped it and held it up for ne to see.

It was a finger, a human finger.

"This is my brother's finger," he whispered. "That monk must ave broken it off in the fight."

"By the gods!" I reached out to over it up with the scarf again.

"No, Gaius. Wait. Look."

The finger moved, just a little, very slowly.

"It's alive," I said softly.

"Yes, Gaius, it is. Now do you believe me?"

She wrapped it carefully in the scarf and once again hid it in her robes. "No one need know, Gaius, but you and I."

I was speechless.

"Let him go, Gaius," she persisted. "Let him go, and you can watch the years pass like minutes, the centuries like days."

Suddenly, without warning, the door burst open and there was a pale, panting, wild-eyed monk. "The blue man!" he shouted. "They've seen him."

I turned, picked up my tall rectangular shield.

"No, wait!" she called, trying to clutch my arm.

I shook her off and followed the monk out the door, running, trying not to think.

"One of our brotherhood," panted the monk. "He found the blue man in the shed — where we store our food. This way."

We rounded the corner of a house.

"The blue man — he ...." The monk broke off and glanced at me with fear-glazed eyes. "He killed him with a single blow of his fist."

We came in sight of a little cluster of monks.

I pushed my way through them.

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There was a man lying there in the dirt, the side of his head smashed to a pulp.

Charon appeared at my elbow, sword in hand. "There are tracks, sir. Footprints, heading toward the cliffs."

"Let's get the horses."

"Too steep and rough, sir. We'll have to go on foot."

I paused and shaded my eyes with my hand. The cliffs were indeed too rugged for horses, perhaps even too rugged for men on foot.

"You monks," I said crisply. "Follow us."

Nobody moved.

One of the monks said softly, "We're men of peace, sir."

"What about you, Charon?" I turned to him. "Are you a man of peace, too?"

"No, sir." He carefully tested the blade of his shortsword with a gingerly fingertip.

"Then come on!"

When next I looked back, the monks were far behind and below us. Redhead was there, too, standing a little apart from the crowd. Then the footprints led us around a bend in the rocks, and we could see them no more.

"Where to now, sir?" demanded Charon.

The footprints had reached an area of bare rock, broad, gray and clean, and there they ended. I turned slowly around, studying the cyclopean boulders that surrounded us on all sides. The sky was a slender crack of light far above us.

"Let's scout around and see if we can pick up the track on the other side of this stone area."

"Yes, sir."

We searched for at least an hour, but there were no more tracks to be found.

"Might as well turn back," said Charon, wistfully returning his sword to its sheath.

I sighed and nodded.

We started back the way we had come.

Or so we thought.

It had been fairly cool, there in the shelter of the boulders and cliffs, but now it was getting cooler yet. I looked up. The narrow area of sky that was still visible to us had turned a sullen, glowering red. It was dark down on the floor of the canyon where we stood, and it was getting darker.

"Sundown," said Charon with a faint smile.

"Are we lost, Charon?"

"Yes, sir. I believe so, sir."

I sat down on a pile of sand. Charon seated himself near me, near enough so he could reach out and touch me. The light continued to fade until I could no longer make out the outlines of Charon's head. I held up my hand before my eyes, but that, too, was invisible. Above

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I could make out a few hard, unwinking stars, but otherwise there was blackness, blackness all around.

"It would be suicide to try to move around in this darkness," I said. "We could fall over a cliff, bring down a rockslide on ourselves."

"Yes, sir."

"In the morning, when it's light, we'll find our way out."

"Of course, sir. And if we can't move, neither can our friend, the blue man."

I considered that a moment. "I wouldn't be too sure about that, Charon. He's had a chance to explore this area. He may be able to find his way around by feel by this time."

There was a long silence, then: "I see, sir."

I heard the sound of Charon drawing his sword and laying it gently on the sand beside him.

I was on the verge of dozing when I felt Charon touch my arm. He said nothing, so I sat listening, trying to decide why he'd touched me.

I could hear his breathing and mine. It was so still that even my pulse beat was clearly audible. I waited.

Finally I whispered, "What...?"

His clumsy fingers fumbled across my face, found my lips, and firmly squeezed them closed.

Again I waited.

Then I heard it, quite plainly.

A distant sigh.

A faint rustle of cloth.

The sound came from the direction where, as I remembered it, the canyon extended backward and upward to what we had supposed was a dead end.

There was a long pause.

Then again the sound of breath, closer now.

The meaning of these sounds was unmistakable. Someone was, with infinite stealth, creeping slowly toward us down the narrow cleft, and I did not see how, in such a narrow passage, he could miss us.

Silently I drew my sword.

Charon moved. I could hear him carefully get to his feet. I, too, stood up and faced in the direction of expected attack. I heard Charon take a step, pause, then take another.

There was a sudden rush, followed by what must have been the thud of a fist against armor. Charon cursed. His sword whistled in the air, but failed to strike flesh. I held my sword at the ready, but dared not strike for fear of hitting my friend.

There was a pause, another rush, the sounds of a violent struggle. Charon cried out in pain. His sword clanged against rock, fell clattering underfoot, and I heard

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the stranger grunt with effort.

"Gaius!" called Charon desperately, and his voice was coming from somewhere higher than my head. The attacker must have lifted Charon high in the air. In spite of the risk, I stepped forward, thrusting my shortsword blindly into the void.

Charon cried out again, and by his cry I could follow the arc of his body as it sailed through the air to strike a distant cliff with a crash and scrape of metal against stone.

When the echo of this crash died away, there was silence again, absolute silence.

How could this demon be so quiet, I thought. Doesn't he have to move at all? Doesn't he have to breathe?

Then, very faintly at first, then stronger, the odor came to my nostrils, the odor the little bearded Arab perfume merchant had told me could only come from the oils and spices used to anoint a corpse. And there was another odor, too, the odor the perfume was intended to mask, the odor I'd smelled many times before on the battlefield, the sweet sick odor of decaying flesh.

I thrust my sword again into the blackness. There seemed to be nothing there. I took a cautious step backward, hoping to connect with the sheer rock face behind me and thus protect myself against attack from the rear, but somehow I had gotten turned around, and the rock was not there.

Ahead of me I heard a soft footfall, then another.

The odor grew stronger.

I went down on one knee, in defensive position, holding my great rectangular shield in front of me. Perhaps, I thought, he'll expect to find me in a standing position. Perhaps, by crouching, I'll surprise him and gain a few second's advantage.

He exhaled again, and I knew he was directly in front of me. I gripped my sword and waited.

Suddenly his fingers closed on my shield with an uncanny rasping noise, not like the sound of flesh against metal, but something drier, more rough and brittle. I thrust my sword forward and up and felt it connect with something, penetrate something, something more like ancient rotting wood than any human body. I drew it out, thrust again, but this time it was knocked from my hand by a blow so violent it sent the sword flying to clatter down some distant cliff into some unseen crevice.

I drew my dagger.

The dry fingers closed again on the rim of my shield and I slashed at them with my knife. A finger, perhaps two, severed from his hand, fell against my face and rebounded to land in the dust.

Why didn't he cry out? Could

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he lose fingers without feeling it?

Then came a terrible blow, a blow so powerful no mere man could have delivered it, a blow that cracked my shield in half. I slipped out of the shield, scrambled backwards. A hand closed on my cape. I unsnapped the clasp and let him tear the cape off me.

He touched me on the arm, and his touch was like ancient dry crumbling papyrus. I slashed at his hand and kept scrambling backward. Suddenly I found myself on a steep shelf of rock, sliding, falling, rolling over and over, and he — he was still with me! I clutched an outcropping, managed to check my fall.

He clutched my ankle and hung there, a terrible weight dragging me down. The small stones and pebbles we had dislodged kept on going — they fell a long, long way.

I realized I must be on the edge of some terrible drop.

He was pulling now, pulling himself up by my ankle.

I reached down with my knife and hacked, sawed and hacked again at his wrist, and that wrist ... it was wood! I tell you it was wood!

But it broke.

Yes, it finally severed, under my frantic, feverish slashing, and he slid away and fell and hit something and fell again and finally, in a shower of loose rocks, thudded to a halt far below.

But that hand of his still clutched my ankle. I felt its fingers move — the hand was still alive!

I had to cut away the fingers, one by one, before I could finally be free.

I crept up the steep rock shelf and finally reached a level place where I felt in no more danger of falling, and there I lay back and closed my eyes, panting, gasping for breath.

After a while I felt better.

Then I heard it, far away and below me.

Someone was moving, slowly and painfully. Someone was moaning softly. He was still alive.

In a frenzy I began pulling loose every rock I could get my hands on and throwing them, throwing them into the darkness. Some of the stones were hitting him! I could hear him grunt with their impact!

And then he spoke, one whispered word, the only word he uttered during the entire struggle.

"Please ...."

I stopped throwing stones instantly, but it was too late. The stones I'd thrown already had started a minor avalanche, and it was several minutes before the last echo of the rockslide died away.

I listened carefully for an hour then, but there was no longer anything to hear.

Shortly after dawn the monks found us and took us back to the

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monastery. Charon was not dead, but it took many months for his ribs to heal, and he always after that walked with a slight limp.

Miriam Redhead made them go with her that afternoon to try and dig out her brother, but it was no use. There were tons of rocks on his body, and they were so placed that whenever the monks tried to remove one boulder, two others would fall in its place.

She was weeping when she returned and I tried to comfort her. "He's dead now. He can't suffer any more," I said.

She turned to me, her insane green eyes blazing with anger. "You fool, Gaius! If only that were true!"

Marius leaned forward, lowering his goblet, now empty, to the table. "Is that all?" he demanded.

The old centurion shrugged. "I warned you you'd find this story unsatisfactory, but you insisted on hearing it."

"But this man ... the woman's brother. How do you explain ...?"

Gaius Hesperian swung his feet to the floor, then stood up and stretched. "Explain? There is no explanation. Out there on the rim of the Empire, these things happen, that's all." He yawned and began walking toward the door.

Marius called after him, "Wait! At least tell me one thing."

Hesperian paused. "What thing?"

"The brother's name."

"His name? What does that matter?"

"I don't know. Just tell me."

"Let's see. Oh, yes, now I remember."

"Yes? Yes?"

"Lazarus," he said.

Marius sat for a long time alone on the porch, watching the rain, before he finally went to bed.

Coming next month

Our 29th anniversary all-star issue, with new stories by **Stephen King, Thomas Disch, Michael Bishop, Terry Carr, C. J. Cherryh, Philip J. Farmer, Ron Goulart** and others. Watch for the October issue, on sale August 31, or send us the coupon on page 56.

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THE FURY MOST FOUL

BAIRD SEARLES

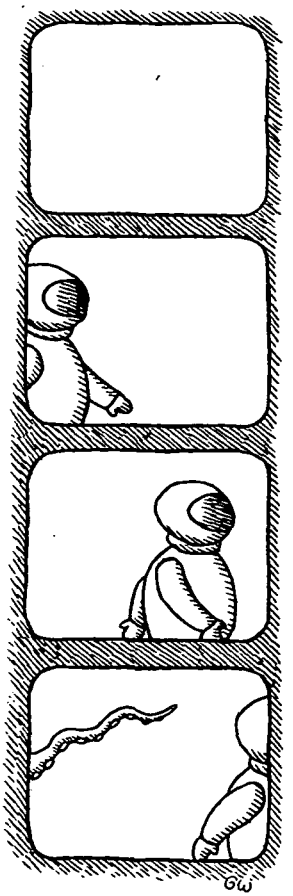
Films

Whatever became of the horror film? Where has it gone, that delightful genre of filmmaking that, by subtle or overt means, gave you chills as well as thrills and that delightfully unsafe feeling while you knew full well that it was only a movie?

We all have our favorites: it might be the hoary old *Frankenstein* from 1931, or the oblique but hair-raising *The Innocents*, or the shoestring budgeted *Carnival of Souls* (the last named is my personal choice).

Whichever, they accomplished the above mentioned ends by craft and style. To cite the most obvious example, the Frankenstein monster, now gone beyond cliche into cultural myth, was in its time a stroke of brilliant and original genius as a visual conception.

Now, more often than not, what is called a "horror" film is something else. It achieves its visceral ends *not* by craft and style, but by shock — sheer unpleasant nasty shock. You or I could achieve the same thing by blowing someone's brains out in front of a camera, and while I concede that there may be some craft involved in simulating such an event, there is precious little art, thought, or any of the things



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that go into the creative process.

I also think that a lot of people are nervous about condemning this trend because they're afraid to be thought squeamish. We were indoctrinated in the '60s into thinking that we should be able to view anything on screen, and any show of distaste marked one as a puritan.

All I can say to this is that I have cheerfully sat through the eyeball slitting scene in *Un Chien Andalou*, the shower scene in *Psycho* and the various nastinesses in *Night of the Living Dead* because they were means to an end and highly effective ones. But when the end itself is sheer bloodletting for its own sake, meant to appeal to the lowest denomination of knuckles-on-the-ground - when - erect Neanderthal audience; when the entire *raison d'etre* of a movie is this kind of shock treatment, then something is awfully rotten in the state of a culture.

This point which I've made before was brought again to mind by Brian De Palma's *The Fury*, which also compounds confusion by continuing the film tradition of science fiction as horror; all the way back to *Frankenstein* and beyond, movie makers have automatically linked the two, a linkage abandoned in the field's literature since the Clark Ashton Smith/Lovecraftian days of *Weird Tales* when ghosties, ghoulies, and tentacled thingies from other planets were all equally malefic and frightening. (If is only the rare and recent film such as *Star Wars* that has transcended the s-f/horror mold.)

The Fury's premise is a good one, one that seems made for film and yet has never really been taken advantage of in the medium; it is that of the telepathic mutant, born into the contemporary society, and the interaction of the superior model human *and* that society. (See Stapledon's *Odd John*, Weinbaum's *New Adam*, Kuttner's "Baldy" stories, and Sturgeon's *More Than Human* for variations on the theme.)

In *The Fury*, it is a boy in Israel and a girl in the U.S. that have the wild talents. They make contact telepathically, then their abilities are discovered and we have the usual meddlesome government trying to "use" them. With that, the movie would just degenerate into a tepid TV-type espionage thriller, save for the aforementioned wholesale gore, used apparently on the theory that that's one thing that will drag the Neanderthal audience away from its tube.

In approximately the last 45 minutes of the film, there are at least seven killings, all shown in loving detail. Every falling body must be shown on impact, every cut and shard of broken glass on a

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body gone through a windshield, every spurt of blood from eyes and ears of the victims of the mutant young people. (A necessary talent for this kind of film, of course, is the ability to break down the insides of anybody that gets in their way.)

The finale of the film is the sight of the girl revenging the boy's death by literally exploding the major villain of the piece, and we see in glorious technicolor and explicit slow motion the endless waves of blood and bits of anatomy flying through the air and splattering the set.

No, thank you, Mr. Di Palma. I want to be skillfully scared, not nastily nauseated; I want the suspense to be that of what's going to jump out of a dark corner, *not* that of when I'm next going to have to make the effort of keeping down my last meal.

And, by the way, it *can* be done in this day and age, the skillful chilling horror movie. I cite as Exhibit A the two Richard Matheson-scripted, made-for-TV movies, *The Night Stalker* and *The Night Strangler*. All you need is talent, skill, and a modicum of taste.

Things-to-come-dept . . . . As I write this, the *Star Trek* movie is back on again, with *all* the old gang pinned down to recreate their parts, Robert Wise (who directed *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Andromeda Strain*) as director, and with a script based on a story by Alan Dean Foster and Gene What-his-name. The budget is $15 million and the effects are by Trumbull. Despite all these positives, I really wonder if the old magic can be recaptured. Oh, yes, the title of the film will be, with startling originality, *Star Trek — The Motion Picture*.

And the animated *Watership Down* is well into production and might be ready this summer. Here's hoping that the people responsible can come up with something besides neo-Disney. (Curiously enough, Felix Salten's novel, *Bambi*, is much closer to *Watership Down* than it is to the Disney movie made from it. Both books have an unblinking regard for the cruelties of Nature that would curdle the blood of the Disney studios.)

Best - double - feature - of - the-month . . . A California theater, during an s/f film festival, paired *Zardoz* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

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Josephine was a patient at a mental hospital who one day asked the familiar question: What if the whole world is crazy, and the people here are the only ones who are sane? The answer was not long in coming.

The Liberation Of Josephine

by CHARLES W. RUNYON

It was Fourth of July at State Hospital No. 6. Male and female patients in secondhand clothing danced together on a blacktop street beneath spreading pin oak trees. There was free ice cream and everybody wore funny hats.

Josephine's hat was a cone of red shiny paper with a spiral of white and a furry blue pompom on the tip. She wore it centered precisely on top of her head. On either side, toward the rear of her round head, her corn-yellow braids stuck out almost straight and turned up slightly. Her hand held an ice cream cup while she watched the dancers. A cluster of white-headed pimples grew at each corner of her mouth, which hung slightly open and vaguely smiling. Her eyes reflected nothing but the dancing figures and the bright lights haloed by swirling moths.

A young man danced by with a fat girl. He wore his flat straw hat over his right ear, and the bright green band bore letters of white which read: WILL I DO, BABY? He winked at Josephine and made a sound like a whippoorwill. Josephine smiled, revealing bright red gums and tiny nubbin teeth shaped like the grains of corn at the end of a cob. Whippoorwill sounds meant the work was done and there was no more cotton to chop that day. It meant the day stretched out and went to sleep, and night came down like when you shake out your blanket over the bed and let it drift down like a parachute.

"Come on, what the hell?"

A big man in baggy gray pants danced by with his knees bent looking like a kangaroo. Gladys was dancing with him, leaning over backward with her legs apart, the way you do when you carry a tub of laundry. Gladys slept three cots away in the cottage. Sometimes she kept Josephine awake complaining that the bugs had laid eggs under her skin and were hatching out. Josephine had helped Gladys pick out the purple flowered dress she

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wore, extra long, so the men wouldn't see the wet sores on her legs. Gladys rolled her eyes at the hedge of purple lilac and said, "Naw, I don't wanta risk it." The big man said again, "Come on, what the hell?" But his eyes were already searching the crowd, a long hungry look with fishhooks in it.

Josephine looked down into her cup. She wouldn't have known how to tell the man no, but she didn't want to leave the bright lights and the happy people. Her ice cream had melted into a watery white liquid. She knelt slowly and set the cup on the ground, twisting it into the matted grass so it would stand up. The squirrels would come down after the dance; she smiled as she thought of them chittering among themselves and wondering who had given them this treat ....

The big man left Gladys and started dancing with Wilma, who slept next to Josephine in cottage three. The band was playing a fast tune, but Wilma moved her body like a cottonmouth moccasin coming down a treetrunk. Josephine knew it was the medicine. Everyone had been given medicine in the dining room before they were brought to the dance, so the crickleys would go to sleep. Wilma had been on very strong medicine since she cut her arms with the razor blade.

Josephine looked around to see if she were the only one from her cottage not dancing. No, Marlene sat on a bench with her sunglasses hiding most of her face. She looked like she might be a famous actress until you saw that her skin was like wax fruit with pores as big as pinholes. And Lucinda, who didn't even know there was a dance, was standing on the other side of the blacktop in a funny hat and black satin dress, smiling with her burnt-out eyes.

And there was a man sitting on a table, with broad straight shoulders in a silvery knitted shirt. His neck came out of the open collar so straight and strong that it made her stomach hurt. His face was clean and smooth, like a bunch of straight lines all coming together at the right places. Josephine thought that if she could only set one person in the whole hospital free, she would choose him, because he was too beautiful to be locked up.

She started trembling when he looked at her. He slid off the table and walked over so lightly that before she could blink her eyes more than once he was standing close enough that she caught the clean hard man-smell of him. He was holding out something in his hand.

"Gum?"

His voice started something humming inside her head like a pitchfork when you hit it against the manger. Her back teeth began to hurt. A sweetness trickled into

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her lower jaws and seeped down into her stomach. She saw mist coming down through the trees and smelled perfume in the air.

Her fingers felt like bananas as she unwrapped the gum, rolled it up, and put it into her mouth. She'd never been so close to a man she really liked. The only time she'd ever felt like this was when she had a puppy and loved it so much she wanted to become him and not be Josephine any more.

"He used to come when I beat on a tin can."

He smiled, and it felt like sunshine on her face. "Oh, you had a dog, did you?"

His eyes were teasing, and she choked off a giggle. "I called him Tiny."

"Ah." He raised his eyebrows as if she'd said something interesting and intelligent. "Because he was tiny?"

"Uh-huh." She could feel the laughter dammed up behind her throat. "When he was little."

He laughed and she did too, until the tears streamed down her cheeks. Mrs. Edmond, who had a nose like a plowshare, gave her a look that made her chop off the laughter like she'd cut a ribbon with scissors. They expected you to be happy there, but if you got too loud about it they gave you extra medicine.

He said, "Let's sit under the tree." So she sat beside him and told him about the pet mockingbird she'd had back in the woods that learned to call her by name.

"It wasn't a big tall woods, just a cutover stand of blackjack and turkeyberry thickets coming up the back porch, and Charlie would scream like a hawk and the chickens would run in a circle yelling."

She looked at his face, hoping to see him laugh, but he only smiled and said, "Do you know why you're here?"

And the way he said it made her think that he knew something she didn't, like the social worker who came and talked to her for an hour before he told her daddy was in jail for cutting a man.

"I'm not crazy, if that's what you think."

"No."

"Sometimes I just didn't know what things meant."

"What?"

"Like ... I'd look at a water bucket and it wouldn't really be that. It would still look like a water bucket but really it's a ... a big orange toad-thing that's looking straight at me. Or the house just ... I look at it and I felt like I didn't really live there, and my little brothers were strangers. I used to start walking and wake up miles from home. People said I'd run past like I was trying to catch something. Sometimes I'd be wearing

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my nightgown and once I ..." She put her hand over her mouth. "Once I wasn't wearing *anything.*"

"But you're better now."

"Oh, yes."

"*Are* you?"

She suddenly felt cold. To change the subject she started telling him about the social worker. "He was mad at everything, mad at me, at daddy for being in jail, mad at the sky for being blue. I listened to him outside the door after I left, and — because that's when people say what they really think about you, and you know what he said to the woman?"

"What did he say?"

"He said I was a perfect stereotype of every feeble-minded inbred vinegar-sour hillbilly in south Missouri. I should have been scratched off as a fetus, but, hell no, the Queen of Iran can't get a kid, but these rednecks turn out litters like turtles laying eggs; then the old man turns lush and the old lady dies of emphysema and diabetes..."

"You know what those words meant?"

"No, but I remember everything. And all the time he was talking, there was a crickley right over his head."

"What's a crickley?"

"It's ... a little animal made out of electricity. All ..." She spread her fingers and wiggled them, trying to think of a way to describe those wrinkly lines just ... shivering in space. "Crickley, that's all."

"Those are called Manous."

"Oh?" It sounded right when he said it. "You've seen them?"

"Yes. They feed off people who are mad, like the social worker."

"Oh." She was surprised that he had seen them; then she remembered that he was a patient too, and she wasn't surprised any more. She discovered that she'd chewed all the flavor out of her gum and took it out of her mouth and put it in the grass. She thought maybe the squirrel named Pedro would find it and try to chew it and get his paws stuck together, and she giggled softly to herself. She started to tell him about this thought she had, but he started speaking at the same time ....

"So you decided to be Josephine," he said, "with a drunken father and a dead mother and a bunch of little brothers. Why couldn't you have been a mockingbird named Charlie, or a squirrel named Pedro?"

She looked at him, feeling again that he knew something she didn't. "I couldn't be them. I'm Josephine."

"How do you know?"

She could see the word in her mind, a baling hook and a doughnut and a snake and another doughnut with a line through it, and a rounded-off ax and a spade

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with a handle on the side ....

She heard the mens' attendant, the fat one who played Santa Claus every Christmas, calling:

"Hall three, over here!" The men started lining up, pushing and shoving, and she knew he had to go, but she wanted to make sure she'd see him again.

"It's on a letter I got from my daddy. I'll show it to you. When will I see you again?"

"Soon," he said, getting up. "Within a week." He walked away, and she saw that his gray slacks were neatly pressed and his shoes shined, and she thought he must have very nice relatives to keep him dressed like that.

Then she realized he hadn't said where to meet him. She got up on the table and tried to find him as the line of men, two abreast, walked away to the tiny-windowed old brick building of the men's section, but she couldn't see him. Then she heard Mrs. Edmond calling: "Josie! We're all waiting."

She fell in at the end of the line and started thinking how stupid she was not to get his name. She forgot to help Lucinda get started, and so Mrs. Edmond made her go back and take the waxy old hand and lead her up with the group.

After lights out she lay in her cot and tried to imagine what she'd say the next time she saw him. Long time no see, or, Been to any Fourth of July dances lately?

A flashlight beamed in her face. "Josephine, you're wanted up front."

The nurse was there, the red-headed one whose hair shone like the cellophane-stuff they put on Christmas trees. She frowned into her medicine tray and went on talking to Mrs. Edmond: "A lot of them are disturbed. It's the dance. I suppose we just have to put up with it once a year. Here Josephine."

Josie looked at the tumbler of purple liquid and put her hands behind her back. "I already had my medicine, ma'am."

"This is just to help you sleep. You weren't asleep, were you?"

"No, ma'am."

The medicine tasted like syrup mixed with turpentine. As Josephine was rinsing her mouth at the fountain outside the office, she heard Mrs. Edmond say:

"She's really been doing well, up till tonight. There was no warning at all."

"But you're sure?"

"Oh, yes. I watched her for ten minutes, sitting under the tree laughing and talking to absolutely thin air."

Josie walked back to her cot, wondering how Mrs. Edmond could have missed seeing him. Of course it was dark under the tree. An unhappy thought wiggled

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hrough her head: Mrs. Edmond ıad lied because she was mad at ıer, because she'd forgotten about Lucinda.

She pulled up the sheet and ried to get back the pleasant houghts she'd been having, but the nedicine was like a spider building ı sticky web inside her head. After ı minute she couldn't even remem- ɔer what he looked like.

Next day she thought she saw ıim in the dining hall, at the far ɔnd of the long factorylike building vhere pale light spilled down from ıigh windows into a pool of clatter- ng trays and plastic glasses. She glanced at the attendants who sat with folded arms on a row of chairs ɔy the water fountain. She saw Wilma start through the serving ine and remembered that Wilma ıad told her that morning that the ɔrange juice was poisoned and she wasn't going to drink it. She watched the lank-haired girl gaze ıngrily at the glass on her tray, then ɔick it up and throw it on the girl who was serving the mashed potatoes. The girl gasped and ıumped back, then seemed to settle ɔloser to the floor as she plunged her scoop deep into the mashed po- tatoes and drew back her arm to ɔhrow ....

Josephine slid out of her chair ınd walked along the wall, past the ɔarrier of trays which separated ɔhem from the men's section. Her steps slowed when she was only ten feet away. The one she'd thought was him rocked slowly back and forth in his chair, his face a wormy mass of twitching muscles.

"Josephine! Get back to your table this minute!"

She turned and with swift heel-and-toe movements walked past Miss Thomson, who had flecks of mashed potatoes on her plump red face and in her grayish-blond hair. "There'll be some more medicine for you when we get back to the cottage, Josie. What's getting into you?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Thomson."

The medicine made her so tired and sleepy that for the next two days she couldn't even think of him. One afternoon, as they walked back to the cottage from music therapy, she heard the shouts of men playing ball. Looking toward the field, she saw the fat attendant from hall three standing behind the catcher. She slipped behind a privet hedge and waited until the rest of the cottage filed past, then walked toward the ballfield, pretending she had a paper in her hand which gave her permission to walk across the grass. Several yards away she stopped and looked for him among the players and the men who sat on the benches.

He wasn't there. She didn't know his name, and so she couldn't ask. She started back and saw Miss

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Robbins half-running across the lawn toward her. She was a lean bony woman with hair like purple cornsilk, and there were patches of white on her freckled face as she came up to Josie.

"I was just —"

"I know what you were *just*. We've got a special medicine for that, honey. Cool you down a little bit."

You couldn't measure time. You did the same things every day: get up, mop, make your bed, take your medicine. Go to breakfast, come back, go to therapy or recreation. Eat lunch, see an old movie, go to supper, come back, take more medicine. Go to sleep, wake up, and do it all over again ....

One morning she was in the occupational therapy room cutting out magazine pictures to paste on a vase she was making. It was hard to cut smooth lines with the short, blunt-pointed scissors they gave out, and she didn't even see him come in. It was only when she reached for the paste that she saw him sitting across the table with a big notebook.

She gave a gasp and started to rear back in her chair.

"Don't move. I'm drawing your picture. Did you bring the letter?"

"No. I forgot, because of the medicine."

"The medicine keeps you from getting well. Don't take any more. Why did they give it to you?"

"They said ..." She drew a deep breath. "They said you weren't really at the dance."

"But you know I was, don't you Oweean?"

She felt a funny flutter in her chest, like a trapped sparrow trying to get out. "My name is Josephine."

He shook his head. "Oweean is your name. And this is what you look like."

He ripped a sheet out of the notebook and pushed it across the table. The girl had a long, straight nose, full lips, and even white teeth. Josephine tongued the ugly gap between her two front teeth, then reached up and felt her stubby, knobby nose.

He reached out and took her hand down. "Stop playing that game, Oweean. You're not stupid and ugly. The punishment is over. Your sentence is up."

For a second she felt as beautiful and intelligent as she looked in the picture. She smiled at him, and it seemed that she'd known him a long time, even better than she'd known her brothers. Then the therapy lady tapped her arm and said:

"Better start putting away your materials. It's almost time to go."

With a sigh she rose and started gathering up the magazine pages and screwing the lid on the pastepot. He stood up too, a look of sadness on his face.

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"All right, Oweean, stay a little longer. You can keep the picture. Look at it every time you feel ugly. And bring the letter next time."

The metal door closed behind him before she realized she still didn't know his name or where to find him. She ran out and looked down the hall. Two male attendants pushed themselves away from the wall and stood looking at her.

"I was looking for a man who just came out ...."

The biggest man did something with his eyes as the door opened behind her. She heard the therapy lady say:

"Do you feel ill, Josie? You want to go back to the cottage?"

She nodded, folding the drawing and hiding it against her stomach. But when she got back to the cottage, the nurse came and gave her more medicine, and the picture turned into a bunch of scrawled lines, like a child's drawing. She started crying silently into her pillow; then the medicine took effect and she forgot why she was crying....

The next day the doctor came and asked her questions, holding the folder they always looked at when they talked to patients. He was a small man with eyebrows like a pair of black woolly caterpillars that kept crawling toward his nose.

"You seem depressed," he said, looking through her and beyond her. "Is there something wrong?"

"I want to leave the hospital," she said.

The eyebrows slid up his forehead as he looked at the nurse.

"She can't leave," said the nurse, "because there's nobody to be responsible for her."

"My father," said Josie, taking the letter from the pocket of her dress. She'd been carrying it since yesterday, because she didn't know when she might see the man.

He read it and looked at the nurse. "He says here he wants to take her home."

"Look at the date. Four years ago."

"Oh."

"He was supposed to come that weekend, but didn't. We wrote a letter to his home. He'd moved and left no address."

He nodded. "You can go," he told Josephine.

Listening outside, she heard him say: "Forty years ago her neighbors would've taken her in. We've got no room for the village half-wit in this society, got to shut them up out of sight even if they're perfectly harmless. Hell, you've got the girl's IQ down in the low seventies. A borderline moron. She's smarter than that."

"Tested when she came in. You see the date."

"Mmmm. Subnormal. No psychosis. Now she's above normal,

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and she's getting audio-visual-tactile hallucinations. I'd like to — hell, what wouldn't I like to do, if I didn't have four hundred patients. Let's ... uh, double the medication for a week, and I'll look at her again."

Josephine refused to take the medicine. One attendant held her while two others poured it into her mouth, one holding the bottle and the other forcing her jaws together so that she had to swallow. The next time she pretended to be obedient but spewed the medicine out on the floor. She was moved from the open cottage to a closed ward with bars on the windows. She learned that if she swallowed with the back of her tongue raised against the roof of her mouth, none of the medicine would go down. But then they started making her open her mouth afterward, and so that didn't work.

After a week she was taken off the closed ward and returned to the cottage. The first day at lunch somebody left Lucinda sitting in the dining room. Josephine started back for her. As she passed one of the men's cottages, she saw him sitting alone on the back steps.

She felt awkward and ugly as she walked up the short sidewalk; then he smiled, and the feeling passed.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"In a special-care unit. For obstreperous prisoners — I mean, patients."

"You're getting better then. When you start getting better, they increase the medicine. I hope you're not taking it."

"Sometimes ... I have to. They force me."

"What is your name?"

"Oweean."

He smiled. "And mine?"

"I don't know."

He looked disappointed; she ached to do something which would please him, then remembered and took the crumpled note from her pocket. "I have the letter."

It had been mauled, folded, twisted and rolled so many times that the paper was like cloth.

"Look at it carefully, Oweean. Just look at it."

She looked. The writing faded, warped, turned blank. She gasped. "There's nothing written."

"There never was."

"But ... my father —"

"Shall I tell you about your father? He is the Sthwkth of B'we ... as you might say, a nutrient technician in the province of Umeno, lower quadrant, fourth continuum level. You are Oweean, third-cycle initiate in the Vymic Sisterhood, sentenced to temporary forfeiture of beauty, intelligence and poise for the crime of arrogance to a member of the servant class." He smiled.

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"Does that make any sense?"

It was like a sackful of rocks. None of the words had any meaning for her. "No."

"Well, how about this?" He waved his hand toward the street. "Bare halls, medicine, electric machines, styrofoam bunnies and walking in line to eat, throwing mashed potatoes and sneaking off behind the bushes. Does that make any sense?"

"No ... but I don't know any choice."

"You know me."

She drew a deep breath and felt a sharp pain in her chest. "They say you're not real."

"They just can't see me, they're so busy looking at grief and pain and woe."

"Why do they do that?"

"That's what they've been sentenced to do. But your time is up. You're free to go."

Josephine heard the mechanical tap-tap-tap of Mrs. Edmond's footsteps on the sidewalk. "Take me with you."

He stood up and smiled, sadly. "I've been trying, Oweean. You have to find the way out by yourself."

She understood that. She had to escape and go to him; otherwise he too would be trapped in this hard-muscled world of chains and steel doors and glittering hypodermic needles.

"Where can I find you?"

"When you know how to leave, you'll know where to find me."

He turned and walked around the building. Though his footsteps seemed unhurried, he moved rapidly across the gently rolling lawn.

"Josie, what are you doing here?"

Mrs. Edmond's saw-edged voice filled her with panic. She started running, through the bushes, across the lawn, toward the six-foot wall which separated the hospital grounds from the street. The shrill burr of Mrs. Edmond's whistle made her think of a giant mechanical bird with a needle beak. She seized the top of the wall and tried to climb up, scraping her knees on the hard stone. Her fingers slipped and she fell to the ground. Two men ran toward her, their faces like dough-masks with no trace of love or anger. In despair she fought them, raking her fingernails across their cold unfeeling flesh. She felt the sting of the needle, and a pink-white cotton-candy mist billowed up and carried her away ....

Day passed into night and night into day; there was no difference. Meals were brought and medicine was given, and silent spider spun its web inside her brain.

One day the nurse unlocked the door and called Josie out. "Your father is here."

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"My father is the Sthwkth of B'we. Is he here?"

The nurse gave her a hard, glittering look. "Come along. Don't try any smart tricks."

He rose from the chair as she stepped inside the office: a large shapeless man with yellowed eyes, dressed in overalls. A cartoon, thought Josephine. She looked into his eyes and saw another presence watching silently. She wondered who he really was and why he had been sentenced.

"Josie ..."

He took a step toward her and held out his huge knobby hands. She stayed where she was. "My name is Oweean. Who are you?"

He turned to the doctor. "What happened to her?"

"She's become alienated. You understand? Cut off from her surroundings, her past life." The doctor turned to her. "Josie, we went to a lot of trouble to find your father and bring him here. Would you like to talk to him alone?"

"My name is Oweean. This is not my father."

The man sat down and rasped his hands together, bending his head. They rehearsed it, thought Josephine. I'm supposed to think, Oh, how hard he has labored all these years, how difficult his life has been. I'm supposed to feel grief and misery and woe ....

"Good-by," she said.

The nurse blocked the doorway. The doctor said, "Let her go, nurse." As she stepped outside she heard him say, "Now Mr. Yancey, we need your authorization for a new course of treatment, if you'll sign this form ..."

The next morning, as she mopped around her cot, she saw a girl with long silver hair looking up from the wet linoleum — not an old-person's hair, but young hair shining around a delicate triangular face. Her eyes were much bigger than any she'd ever seen on people, and her nose curved gracefully out to a rounded tip. She was beautiful as nobody on this earth had ever been.

"Josephine ..."

Miss Engle's voice was shy, almost timid. She'd just transferred from the kitchen staff and hadn't yet developed the mirror-bright cheerfulness that regular attendants had. Everything you said to *them* bounced right back without ever penetrating the surface.

Josephine was about to answer when she saw the reflected image change into a ravine cut into red clay. A great spreading net of cottonwood roots had been exposed by the wash of the ravine. Nestled beneath them, like a giant egg caught in the tentacles of an octopus, was a gleaming silver ship.

"Josephine, you're supposed to

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see Doctor Barnaby."

Josie leaned her mop against the bunk and turned. Miss Engle was only a little older than herself, rather chubby with a pasty complexion and dark, dancing eyes.

"Is it about my release?"

Miss Engle's eyes slid sideways. "I really can't say."

As they walked toward the gray stone building, Josephine said, "Have you ever thought that the whole world is crazy and the people here are the ones who are getting well?"

Miss Engle chuckled. "You go sane and you get locked up? Well, maybe. I'd rather be out than in, though. The walls are further apart."

If I knew where the ship was, Josie thought, *I would run now.*

She sensed the fear the moment she entered the waiting room. A tiny wrinkled man with protruding eyes kept running his forefinger around the inside of his shirt cuff. A fat black woman slumped down in her chair with her arms folded under her breasts, her chin clamped tightly down on the folds of her neck. A tall skinny girl sat with her knees together, fingers laced in her lap, her gaze fixed on a point in space two feet before her eyes. A small black-haired woman whose bulbous forehead shone with scar tissue shot a look of fear at Josephine as she sat down.

Miss Engle walked forward and gave her slip to the nurse, then came back and took the chair beside Josephine. *Strange,* she thought. Usually on doctor's visits they left the slips and came back later for the patients.

A big blond man in a green coat stepped through a door, picked up a slip, and called out: "Sally Beezly." The black woman whimpered softly. Two attendants helped her to her feet and gently half-carried her through the door. Josephine heard the woman say, "I wish you'd throw that goddamn machine in the river, that's what I wish you'd do. I wish you'd throw that goddamn motherf—"

The door closed, and Josephine felt a jellylike softening of her legs. From the closed cottage she'd seen them taken out for shock therapy, like people walking on broken glass, and had seen them brought back like punctured balloons, drained of all memory. She felt an urge to reach out and grasp something, anything. What she grasped was Miss Engle's hand.

"What does the machine do?" she asked in a whisper.

"It shoots electricity into your head. I don't know what happens then."

"Do the doctors know?"

Miss Engle gave a lopsided smile. "They don't shoot it into their own skulls, honey."

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Josephine felt like throwing up the watery orange juice and oatmeal she'd had for breakfast. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the vision she'd seen in the linoleum. I am Oweean, slim and beautiful, with silver hair. He waits for me with a silver ship concealed in the roots of an old cottonwood ....

Would the machine erase all that?

She heard feet scraping as the little man was taken into the next room. A drawer squeaked as the nurse pulled it open. Josephine heard the muffled clatter of pencils, then the soft shh-shh of an eraser. One of the attendants shifted his feet and coughed. The nurse crumpled a sheet of paper with a sound like someone biting into celery. Another name was called, Edna Phipps. The door closed. A knifing scream was suddenly stilled like an icicle falling into snow.

Josie's brain felt needle-sharp, her senses acute. Cottonwood trees grew near rivers. A river curved around east of the hospital, she'd seen it from the O.T. room. There was a ravine too; she remembered the centipede of red clay crawling up the far hillside.

"Josephine ..."

Miss Engle was nudging her. Josephine felt calm as she walked toward the open door. The blond man's blue eyes held a sad sort of kindness, as though he were about to put a beloved pet to death ....

"I'll be right outside," said Miss Engle. "Don't worry."

Josephine felt as though she were floating up near the ceiling, watching herself walk toward the high, hard bed. The machine was a black box no larger than a suitcase. She lay down and felt the bite of the needle with a remote sense of pain, like when you touch your tongue to a numbed finger.

The blond man's hands were warm as he smeared sticky paste on her temples. Straps were clamped around her hips, shoulders and ankles. The attendants lined up three on each side. They laid her hands on her flesh ....

White light flashed behind her brain. It swelled into a radiance too brilliant to bear ....

"The charge is made, Oweean," said the silver-robed patriarch seated atop a fluted pillar, *"that you did, in the riftig time-segment of yugo thirty-three thousand seven hundred and two, dismiss a servant named Sluveri who was with child, thereby contributing to the voluntary discontinuance of her life-contract. Is it true?"*

"It is true, honored Tybo."

"You are then sentenced to endure poverty and ignorance until you reach a full understanding of your crime. You will report to the psychic transfer unit as soon as you have put your affairs in order."

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She felt the straps loosened. Hands helped her to her feet. I can walk, she thought, but it is best to pretend to be weak and confused, the way the others always are. It will make it easy later ....

The sleeping room had been in darkness for two hours. Bars of lemon light came through the window of the office, where Josephine could see the night attendant reading a magazine. The door was locked, of course, but Josie wasn't worried. She slid out of bed and walked to the window. Closing her eyes, she imagined herself outside the walls, across the river, beside the red ravine. She felt her body being stretched and pulled apart, exploded into a million atoms.

A breeze pressed her nightdress against her body. She looked up and saw the stars like pinholes punched in dark fabric. Behind her the lights of the hospital sprawled over the sloping hills. She started walking to the left.

He appeared on the lip of the ravine, a figure etched in silver light. "Oweean," he said.

Suddenly she knew his name. "Sha'arin."

His embrace was like that of the first man in her life, but she knew, now, that he was her oldest lover. They had cohabited during her last three retreats at the Vymic Sisterhood, and each time she had contributed a child to the glory of Slokwon. The touch of his body was totally familiar, totally blissful.

"You're almost free," he said.

"Almost?" She felt a stab of fear. "But I thought ..."

"There's only one more step." He slid his arm around her waist and guided her down into the ravine, through the round door of the ship. He helped her into a deep soft seat and fixed the clamps over her body. Then he squeezed her hand and whispered, "You'll be out before you know it."

He climbed into the pilot's seat, smiled over his shoulder, and pushed a lever ....

The nurse shined her flashlight into the vacant eyes and down the thinly clad body. Her knees were drawn up to her chest, her arms clasped tightly around them.

"Why do you think she walked to the window?" asked the attendant.

The nurse shrugged and clicked off her light, dropping it into her pocket. "Hard telling. Maybe she thought she could get through the bars." With a grunt she bent down and seized Josephine under the arms. "Let's carry her to bed. No use waking the doctor. She'll keep till the morning shift comes on."

Oweean laughed, a musical tinkle rising from her slender throat.

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"Sha'arin, the puppy! You remember the puppy!"

Sha'arin, kneeling beside her couch, smiled. "You have a sentimental imagination." He picked up the helmet and slid it into an alcove in the pink translucent wall. "How about some fresh air?"

Oweean followed him through the doorway and stepped onto the slow-moving belt. As far as she could see down the long corridor, tiny round windows opened into cells like the one she'd just left. Taking Sha'arin's hand, she stepped off the belt and peered through one of the inspection ports. A male saurian with gold-green scales lay on a couch with a silver helmet covering his head. From the top of the helmet sprouted a tangle of wires which led into the wall.

"Recognize the crickley?" said Sha'arin.

"Oh, yes! The helmets. All those unhappy people, punishing themselves." She felt a quiver of sympathy as the saurian gave a low, strangled moan. She glanced at the plastic strip inserted in a slot beside the doorway. *Aquiv P'glos, murder.*

"What's happening to him?"

"He's being murdered — or will be, before his sentence is up."

"How do you bring them out when it's over?"

"In his case, the experience of death will break the current, and he'll wake up immediately. In cases like yours, which call for a less drastic penance, we cut down the power gradually. The illusion grows thin, little things show through, like your crickleys. Periodically one of the attendants comes along and plugs himself in here —" He pointed to a round hole beneath the port. "— and gives a little nudge in the right direction. It's better to come out gradually, since you remember the experience. There's less chance you'll make the same mistake again." He took her hand and stepped back on the moving belt. "I'm afraid most people remain ignorant until the current is cut off completely, though. The ratio of death to liberation runs at about a thousand to one."

Outside, she breathed deeply and gazed at the purple globe of Derg which hung above the horizon like a giant plum. The bright orange disk of Arbux was nearly straight overhead.

"You guide all the pretty girls back, Sha'arin?"

He laughed. "I'm only one of a hundred thousand attendants, sorry." He took her hand and squeezed it. "Just a simple transfer technician. I told you that when we met."

Turning around, she lifted her eyes to the top of the towering beehive structure, so high that a cloud had formed at its summit. Sha'arin had told her that it went ten times

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as deep underground.

"How many are there?"

"This serves the entire fourth level. We have ... nearly three billion now."

"What if someone cut the power to all the caps, all at once?"

"Then everybody would wake up, and we'd have three billion nuts in our midst. It's better to keep them put away, where they won't bother anybody."

The doctor looked at her face. Her smooth skin was radiant, her features relaxed and serene. "Strange about catatonics," he mused aloud. "Brain patterns keep showing up on the EKG. I can't help wondering what goes on inside those quiet skulls ..."

ELLISON WINS NEBULA AWARD

Harlan Ellison's "Jeffty Is Five" has won the Science Fiction Writers of America Nebula award for best short story of 1977. The awards were presented at a dinner in San Francisco in late April.

Other winners were Frederik Pohl's *Gateway,* best novel; Spider and Jeanne Robinson's "Stardance", best novella; and Racoona Sheldon's "The Screwfly Solution," best novellette.

"Jeffty" was the feature story in our special Harlan Ellison issue (July 1977). A limited quantity of the July issue is still available. The issue also includes two other Ellison stories, an article by Harlan, profile by Robert Silverberg, a critical appreciation by Richard Delap and an Ellison bibliography.

Send $1.50 for each issue (includes postage, envelope and handling) to: Mercury Press, PO Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753.

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Here is an unusual story about a man who is on the road (just where, he was not sure) selling something (he had forgotten what) and searching for a way to go Home. It was like a bad dream.

No Left Turn, No Right Turn, No Thorofare (No Parking, No Backing Up)

by RAYLYN MOORE

Today it was the crack in the earth. He rose early, so as to have plenty of time for scaling yesterday's high, smooth wall of curiously soft cinderblock, which had required toeholds to be cut with a nailfile from his pocket.

His mind, beginning on waking to turn over like some worn but reliable engine, was at once absorbed in recalling those scraped-out places so painfully excavated; he was hoping they had been left so he could climb the wall again benefited by his own labor of the previous day, thinking that the worst would be to find the toeholds erased so that he would have to begin over.

The worst, however, was to discover that the wall itself had disappeared, perhaps into the fissure which now occupied nearly the whole space between the dormitory and the cafeteria.

It must have happened during the night, but — on so ambitious a scale? How was that possible when there had been no nocturnal disturbance, no rumble of seismic retching, jittering of furniture within, smashing of paltry artifacts (such as buildings) as the earth heaved? He was a light sleeper, all peeled nerves and raw apprehensions just waiting to be engaged by some alarm. He would have wakened.

The light was the color of cooked chowder, the milk slightly curdled at the point on the horizon where the sun would soon come floating to the surface of the mixture. But at least there was enough illumination to see what had happened, what today's challenge was. Very cautiously he approached the verge. The canyon was not really so wide, perhaps twenty-five feet from lip to lip, a mouth parted not in a laugh but a sardonic grin. The depth, however, was something else.

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Lying prone with only his head extended over space, he could see down the steep sides only a short distance before shadow intervened, gray shadow thinly covering a fixed blackness beyond. And when he tossed in a fist-sized rock, the clatter of its re-echoing ricochet from the walls could be heard briefly from far down; after that the silence was unbroken by any sound of an object striking bottom.

He rose and began to walk along the edge of the fissure, having chosen for no particular reason to turn right. The crack couldn't go on forever, could it?

After an hour, however, doubt began to accumulate like scum on the now-simmering pot of his thoughts. Should he have turned left then, walked down the canyon in the opposite direction? If he had, he might have been at the chasm's end by now, or at least have reached a place narrow enough to step or jump across. Too late to rectify. His own fault and yet, contradictorily, he was blameless, for there had been no sign to direct him. There should have been a sign.

The sun, now fully risen, began to scorch the atmosphere, calling forth sweat beads which broke and bathed his skin in warm brine as he walked, hurrying so as not to be too late, trying not to mind the hunger swelling inside him.

It occurred to him that today's walking was not so imminently imperiling as had been yesterday's climbing.

There was that, at least. So long as he remained a respectful distance from the chasm, and the end appeared soon, he might still be all right. But the gap went ploughing relentlessly ahead through the earth.

From time to time he paused to re-examine the breadth, which remained discouragingly the same as in the beginning, and again to attempt soundings with tossed-in rocks. But, as before, none but ricochet noises came back. The experience lent his sense of futility the further indignity of impotence, as if, in trying to worship some giant yoni, he was only squandering his seed in the fathomless wastes of the indifferent womb of Earth.

And then, just as the problem began to seem hopeless, one of the rocks returned a faint thud as if striking a floor. A hundred yards farther along, the floor had apparently risen sharply. Could he cross now? Let himself down one of the sheer walls and hope to get up the other? (Did he still have the nailfile?) For as far as he could see, the gorge still threaded through the landscape.

Caution, however, told him to wait, and having waited, he was re-

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warded when ten minutes farther along he had reached a place where the bottom of the fissure was in sight, a scant ten feet down.

Once across, of course, he was faced with having to hike all the long way back to the compound, walking this time with his energy seriously depleted, his hunger turned by time from a craving to a sickness.

He managed this second leg of the trek by keeping his eyes off his feet, looking only at the landscape (a dangerous diversion; there were many small pits to trip him up, boulders to stumble over, and no warning signs out here). Determinedly he contemplated the mauve mountains aligned in two patient queues to the distant right and the distant left. Doggedly he considered the riverless valley between, a primitive composition in numerous values of ocher and sienna, but with no verdure for contrast — an unrelieved desert.

What would happen if some morning instead of walking as usual from the dormitory to the cafeteria, he set off toward those mountains? But this was an old game, no longer worth playing, because the answers were always the same. In the first place only a fool would set off unprovisioned, and there was apparently no way to get food except at the cafeteria, which required its consumption on the premises. There were signs saying so.

Anyway, the only morning exit from the cafeteria was into the fenced car park, so even removing food would avail nothing. The evening exit back to the sleeping quarters always led to unrestricted range of the bleak valley — he was in it now, wasn't he? — but he was inevitably too tired at night even to think of setting out on an expedition, especially one so doubtful.

For even if the desert was not uncrossable, the mountains would surely be impassable. And in the event they were not — attaching one shaky hypothesis to another now, building with jackstraws — wasn't it quite likely, everything considered, that there was nothing on the far side of the mountain range but more desert?

And all this didn't even touch the more basic dilemma. If he were ever so insane as to set off, should he turn left or right when he first emerged from the dorm? Should he walk toward the mountains on the east side of the desert valley or the seemingly equidistant mountains on the west? The correct choice might make all the difference, and because of the seriousness of this single fact, he would be unable to choose, would be forever immobilized at the setting-off point by his own lack of authority.

For he knew himself well; he

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had decided a long time ago that his only hope lay in not departing from the order of things, whatever it was. He was no revolutionary.

Still another hour passed. He tramped on until finally the familiar structures of the compound reappeared, shivering in the heat, the dormitory on one side of the fissure, refectory on the other (his side now), the fueling station and car park beyond it. The freeway entrance ramp, uncompromisingly delineated by a high double sweep of steelmesh, was the only exit from where the cars were kept.

But now he also saw the thing he had missed seeing in the milky light of predawn. It was just a footbridge, hooded with more steelmesh so no walker could slip off (or jump) into the crack in the earth. It arced across the fissure about fifty feet beyond the compound on the far side.

So if he *had* turned left this morning on first sight of the chasm, he would have found this catwalk. But before the full impact of that thought hit him, he had already summoned the certainties that would neutralize regret. There was no doubt whatever that even had he seen the crossover when he first emerged from the dorm, he couldn't have used it. There would almost surely have been a sign on it saying NO ADMITTANCE from the dorm side. Or DO NOT ENTER. The gate at that end of the bridge might even have a one-way lock securing it on that side.

For almost everything was ONE-WAY these days. Or KEEP OUT, or NO TRESPASS. Even the TV set in his dormitory room bore a warning sticker in large red type: DO NOT CHANGE CHANNELS.

Of course now he knew also why he'd missed feeling the quake. There had been no quake. The gorge had already existed when he came in last night, in thick dark, shuffling from exhaustion, in possession only of enough energy to eat and follow the signs. EXIT ONLY. THIS WAY OUT. Undoubtedly he himself had used the small pedestrian overpass to get to his bed, the huge cleft it spanned then concealed under a blanket of night, the footbridge itself undifferentiated from all the other corridors, paths, bridges, walkways which the signs regularly told him to take in the course of a day.

In any case, the only thing to do with this matter now was put it out of mind, concentrate on the more pressing item: he was going to be late starting out. Stung by the realization, he hurried the last few steps, lost his footing in a frost pit the size of a pieplate, and fell full-length just two feet short of the ramp leading into the building.

Jarred, winded as a suddenly pricked balloon, irked with himself

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that the sense of caution which was his guiding principle had failed him on this last critical lap of his morning journey, he picked himself up slowly, dusted off his clothing without looking at it, and entered through the automatic door.

He was the only customer. The forebodings of lateness lay piled around the large room like snowdrifts. She was standing at the head of the long panel with its many knobs and buttons and chutes. Her skin was cream sherry overlaid with peach blush. (THIRTY-NINE FLAVORS, said a faded sign on the wall at her back.) Her hair was raw umber from which the even illumination proceeding from an invisible source struck off amber glints of lightning when she moved.

"Dorothea!" he said. "Wow, am I glad to see you!" What was meant as an affectionate salute came out a weak croak because of the parched condition of his aching throat.

Slowly she turned, held him momentarily with the glazed, affronted look of the mistakenly accosted stranger. Then he saw that the scrawled machine embroidery on the front of her crisp green smock said, "Caroline."

He should have let it go, but the physical impression of her had been too poignant, the certainty of his being right too firmly fixed. "Yesterday morning," he pointed out reasonably, as if this was an argument he could expect to win by force of logic, "your name was Dorothea. You were standing just where you are now. You smiled at me and we began to talk, but then you had to rush away — something to do with your job." But in his own ears his voice, toward the end of the speech, seemed to run down in a sour whine.

"Ultimately irreparable," she said in a flat alto, looking in the opposite direction as she fiddled with one of the buttons on the machine.

He either could discern, or imagined he could discern, the faint shadows of brown aureoles where her breasts thrust against the crepitant green gauze of her uniform. (Was it made of paper, some kind of thin paper? Maybe the same stuff as the shirts he himself wore, finding a clean one aseptically wrapped and ready in the bureau drawer of his room every morning, tossing the wilted one away in the wastebasket every night.)

By this time he knew it was hopeless, but he had to try once more anyway. "All right then, Caroline. Whatever you say. But couldn't we talk *now? You* work here. You must know at least some of the answers."

"Too many windows," she said (or he thought she said), her attention apparently still on the mech-

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anism, a room-length stainless-steel facade with an almost sensient expression of inscrutability.

"Just level with me, that's all I ask," he begged, feeling his voice squeaking out of control, but going on regardless. "Tell me why. Why? *Why?*"

She walked away down the counter which fronted the long, complex machine.

Quickly he began to assemble a meal. He stabbed a button marked ORANGE JUICE and the chute below ejected a half-green banana. He tried one marked EGGS, SUNNY and got a wax-wrapped packet of matzohs. He supposed the machine must be some kind of computer. At least it looked like pictures he had seen of computers. Here and there along the counter, and also along the opposite wall of the room, were other items of food in preparation, arrayed as if for the edification of diners. On a miniature rack over a flaming container of Sterno, mushroom soup, still in the can, bubbled like mud in a volcanic pit. Turning slowly on a black iron spit over an open fire was a dripping leg of lamb. The spit was powered by a pomeranian wearily treading the revolving floor of a closed wire cage. Not six feet away from the fireplace, on the floor, a bucket icecream freezer also turned, powered by a small electric motor.

He pushed a few more buttons, then set his collected breakfast on the nearest table. He had by fortunate accident gotten coffee when he pressed the TOAST button. The COFFEE button had yielded only a sliding pile of Herbert Hoover quarters, which having no use for, he had left in the chute.

The coffee helped his throat and when the caffeine began its work a few minutes later, propping his nerves temporarily where they had sagged, he felt the fatigue begin to go.

EXIT, said the sign. THIS WAY. He was ready. He found the Mercury he had driven the day before, was gratified to discover the key he pulled from his trouser pocket fit the ignition. (But the key always fit; it was the one reliable factor in an otherwise shifting environment, a point of reference in chaos. There had never been any trouble about the car.) The motor gasped, then thrummed hardily.

At the fuel area he self-serviced the tank, checked the oil, peered into the radiator. He had a shamefully sentimental feeling about the car akin to romantic love. They had been together for some time. (How long? He didn't know.) Certainly he had moments of wishing it had been his lot to drive one of the newer models he saw occasionally on the road, not necessarily one of those that ran on an aircushion in-

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stead of tires, but at least a rotary engine — something with a little more dash than the archaic internal-combustion engine. But he never had these moments without quickly following them up with a reaffirmation of loyalty to the Merc. It had served him well.

Nor did it do any good to wish to change one's lot. How could he acquire another car? There was nothing at the end of the off-ramp at night but the familiar cafeteria and dormitory. No car dealers had ever materialized. Out here in the desert, there wouldn't be enough trade to keep a business like that going, he supposed. On the TV in the evenings, he often saw elaborate and evocative commercials for late-model cars, but the ads carried no reference to specific agencies. Still, someone must be selling them somewhere. He guessed that was a good thing to know, in case he was ever in a position to look into it.

Not forgetting about the lost time, he raced the motor and the Mercury surged out of the ramp and into the thin stream of freeway traffic. This traffic had seemed to become sparser every day, but perhaps this was only his imagination. If it *was* dropping away, then that must mean some people at least were discovering the way out. If there were only some way to communicate from one vehicle to another ... if he never saw anyone parked along the road, he would stop and try to talk, but so far, in all his days on the freeway, he had seen no cars but those in motion, and no people but those in the cars.

Under other circumstances, he might have tried flagging down the highway patrol, which was certainly highly visible and active. About every ten minutes — he had no watch any more but had been interested enough to count off the seconds — a figure that was definitely wearing the uniform of the highway patrol flashed past at tremendous speed in the very center of the highway divider strip, alternating direction each time. At first he'd thought the vehicle supporting the officer was some kind of silently powered motorcycle, but gradually he'd come to the conclusion it more closely resembled an iron horse, like those he had seen as a child (or perhaps been told about; nothing was that clear any more) in Steeplechase Park at Coney Island.

Undoubtedly then, the patrolmen weren't real, but some kind of dummies or robots sent past for the cautionary effect upon would-be traffic violators, the horses perhaps attached to an endless belt or cable underlying the strip. Yet the odd thing was that they did issue tickets. He had been booming down the road at just over the century mark one day when an officer passed. Seconds later, a ticket, all care-

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fully inscribed and highly accurate even on spelling, had popped up in duplicate on the inside of the windshield.

Since then he'd gotten several more tickets for various infractions but, not knowing what to do with them, had finally thrown them all away.

He accelerated now to ninety, which seemed a good cruising speed, and one he had already tested to be sure it fell short of a ticketable offense.

Ahead, far away, an ant toiling uphill with the day's provender, was a large van in the right-hand lane, the lane the Mercury also occupied. A clumsily tied-on tarpaulin contorted wildly in the slipstream around the vehicle, a mindless piece of matter in an animated struggle for freedom.

He remembered to try to glimpse the sun, chart his direction, but though it had shone brightly enough to make him uncomfortable during his early-morning hike, it was muted frustratingly indeterminate. It seemed as if this same problem presented itself every day. Annoying, and yet what difference would knowing compass direction make in practical terms? He certainly couldn't change his course even if there were some valid reason to. You can't turn around on a freeway.

Thinking about such accessory issues, however, never really distracted him from the real work of the day, which was the business of trying to find his way back.

Once, not so long ago, his weeks on the road had been punctuated by weeks at home. There had been an off-ramp which he could count on to take him without fail to an old (Edwardian) frame house, freshly painted white every other spring, in a rural town that smelled all summer of freshly clipped grass and all winter of wood smoke from fireplaces. (It was the only kind of smoke in the atmosphere there.)

In front of the house were ancient trees and behind the house was a new swimming pool inserted into an old garden, where children gathered grapes and mulberries, and occasionally flowers to fill the vases in the house.

It was here, in this town, in this house, in this garden, beside the pool, that Estelle, an even-tempered blonde all tanned leg and shining brown eyes, waited for him and celebrated his homecomings well and imaginatively.

A fat yellow schoolbus came down the street in the mornings, and on Saturday afternoons it always seemed that the children were either about to depart for a birthday party or just arriving home from one.

Next to Estelle it was of course the children whom he missed most.

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But this kind of nostalgia was a more complex emotion than he had first thought. It had to do not alone with the idea that the children were of his own begetting, but with the very fact of their being children. He seemed never to see any children in his present environment, not even in the passing cars; though on account of the speeds on the freeway, he could not be entirely sure they weren't there sometimes.

He had been selling something then. (Insurance? Aluminum siding? Mutual funds? What did it matter?) And getting back to the house and Estelle and the children had made all the stopovers in the motels and the meals at Howard Johnson's seem worthwhile. They had meaning because the homecoming was always around the corner. Next weekend, or the one after.

But then somehow he had lost his way. It happened when he was traveling in the Southwest, heading toward Barstow. Or perhaps it was somewhere very like Barstow, and he was heading away from it. Being on the road tended to dull perceptions of exact place, of exactitudes of all kinds. And after whatever happened had happened, though he kept searching steadily for the ramp that would take him home, he could never find it again.

He believed this failure had nothing to do with the fact that the name of the town was one of the things he had forgotten. He still had intuitions, and a strong homing instinct, else he wouldn't have kept trying for so long. So even though the exits had all come to look alike now, he would know the right one if he ever came to it. He would just *know*.

Meanwhile, he was willing to come to temporary terms with the displacement, was even glad just to discover, at the end of each difficult day's driving, the ramp that would take him back to the compound with the rather tatty accommodations, the cafeteria and the dormitory.

There was not much doubt that the cafeteria must have been a Howard Johnson's restaurant once, and the dormitory an AAA-approved motel. But he didn't often speculate about these curiosities any more, on grounds such thoughts didn't seem to lead anywhere.

A number of times, however, when he still had money with him, he had tried to telephone. The instruments in the booths just outside the cafeteria were all new videophones, but not one remained in good repair. Dropping a Nixon metal dollar into the slot and dialing his home number might bring the image of an old-fashioned jeweler's clock showing the correct time (— but the correct time where?), or an uninhibited orgy, or

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the chalkboard background for a lesson in Reformed Esperanto.

About the money — he had worried quite a bit after it was gone. Until he recognized his concern as a vestigial anxiety from former times which did not fit the present order. For no one seemed to care about money any more. The cafeteria machinery simply went on cranking out its a la carte items and offering them in its befuddled fashion, and the gas pumps had been readjusted so they no longer required coins to operate them. (Here again, like the key fitting the ignition in the mornings, was at least something he could count on. Gas always came out of the gas pump, air out of the air hose.)

So now he was driving — midday already, probably a little after, perhaps more than a little — not to sell some product or service from city to city and earn a salary, but to find either the lost exit back home or, failing that, the one he'd become accustomed to taking when night came.

And of course to find someone — anyone — who would tell him something about what was happening. That hope was never far from the surface either.

Sometimes he wondered how long Estelle would wait.

He had almost caught up with the van now, was just pulling into the inner lane to shoot ahead, noting absently as he began to draw even that the tarp on the truck seemed looser than ever, hanging by a thread, when a sudden blanking of vision startled him into a sinister swerve.

The canvas, of course. It had torn free at last, and briefly embraced his own windshield, neatly as a cover dropped over a canary cage, before blowing off again and away.

But now both left tires of the Mercury were being sucked over into the shoulder of the road, and the Mercury's steering wheel had suddenly become a wild bundle of hostile energy directed against himself. He hung on, wrestled the dragon almost to submission, and even knew a slim moment of hope that everything might still be all right. But then the steel support pole for one of the giant overhead freeway signs came driving straight toward him.

It was true his speed had diminished considerably by the time he struck the pole. So the impact, though frightening enough, was far from demolishing. In fact he was still conscious, and sufficiently alert to watch the van, now tarpless, and apparently empty inside (so what had been the use of the flapping cover, anyway?), disappearing over a rise in the road ahead.

Tenderly testing for damage to himself and the Mercury, he open-

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ed the door and stepped out into the neatly ordered shrubbery on the median strip. Were the plants real or plastic? He'd never known, never having had an opportunity to examine them before. He bent down, felt a handful of rubbery foliage, and still wasn't sure. It might be a composition, yet some succulents felt like that.

When he straightened up, a stranger was standing there. Jean-clad figure, hands in pockets. "You all right?"

"Yes, I believe so. Not sure about my car."

"But it doesn't matter, does it? As long as you're all right, you can leave the car here."

He stared at her. She was young. She was tall and deeply tanned. Long, loose hair approximately the color of Estelle's. A faint stir of wind freed a gauzy exterior layer of this hair and puffed it about her face like new-washed soft curtains in a summer window. "It can hardly be left here. There are signs all over about not parking on the freeway, and the cops are due to go past any minute now. Besides, I need the car to get where I'm going."

"Oh? Then you're going somewhere?"

He stared again. "Isn't everyone?"

She shrugged, took a couple of long strides which brought her to the front of the Mercury. "It looks bad."

"I don't care how it looks. It's whether it'll still run or not that counts. But it always seems to run, no matter what happens. And I've got to get it out of here before —" Realization crackled through him, an electric jolt. Why, this was it, wasn't it? What he'd been waiting for. She might be someone who knew the answers, or at least who would let him ask the questions. And all he was doing was fretting about the goddamned car.

But on the other hand, better not move too fast. Don't want to blow a chance that may never come again. Play it slow, and by ear all the way.

He tried to seem casual as he got back into the Mercury, leaving the door sagging open and her watching him. He pressed the starter. The motor went right off.

"Amazing," he said. "But then so many strange things have happened —"

He remembered then to look around for her car, but there wasn't any vehicle there but the Mercury. "By the way, how did you get on the freeway? Pedestrians are prohibited."

"I wasn't always a pedestrian."

"You were in a car?"

"I was in a womb."

"But your clothes — everything," he objected foolishly.

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"This is so boring. Let's get started, then, if you insist on driving."

Too good to be true. "You mean you'll come with me?"

He couldn't resist adding, "And talk to me?"

"Anything." Couple more strides (graceful strides, though, engaging the slender hips in a provocatively coordinated swaying motion), and she was around the car and in before he could offer to help her.

He closed the door, backed carefully away from the pole, righted the car, which had swerved to a slant when the pole struck the front to the left of center, and started off.

There was a preposterous clatter as if it had started to rain pots and pans.

He stopped again and got out, wrenched off some of the damaged and dragging grille from the Mercury — it came away in his hands with a remarkable lack of resistance — and tried again. Quieter now. He accelerated cautiously, hoping the radiator wasn't punctured and draining dry, or the crankcase sprung and spilling its guts. Perhaps he should have made a more thorough examination, but the highway patrol was surely due.

Just as he thought this, one of the iron horses whooshed past, and a second or so later three tickets slapped softly against the interior of the windshield. He knew what they were for without looking: illegal parking on a median strip, damage to a pole, and littering (the grille parts he'd thrown away).

At least he hadn't still been sitting there when the cops passed. He wasn't sure what the consequences would have been, but decided he'd rather not know. He was on his way now, could turn his full attention to the really important thing that had happened to him.

She had her head back on the seat as if she was in a dentist's chair. Long feather-soft swan's throat, good profile sharply defined. "Listen," he said. They were back at cruising speed now. There was no chance for her to drift away like the girl in the cafeteria. "Do you suppose I could get some information from you?"

"Why not?" She turned her head agreeably toward him, even smiled encouragingly.

It had been a long time since he'd really talked with a woman, with anyone. "For instance, can you tell me why it is that I go along all day on this freeway, and when night comes, I'm exactly where I stopped the night before?"

"Exactly?"

"I think so. A rest-and-refueling stop. Restaurant, place to sleep — you know."

"Maybe you're traveling in a circle. Or perhaps each time it's a

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different place that just seems the same."

"I've thought of that. It would explain some of the things that go on. Like one morning finding a cinderblock wall with no gate, as if it had been built by mistake, and the next day discovering a crack in the earth instead. It might even explain why the girl in the cafeteria is never the same girl. The desert valley and the mountains always seem the same, though. So nothing quite fits ...."

She nodded reflectively, chewed a corner of her right thumbnail.

"But actually none of this part of the problem matters, you understand. What I really want is to get home. Have you any idea how I could do this?"

"Why don't you take a side road?"

"I haven't found any. This seems to be a limited-access highway."

"No exits?"

"Except to the overnight stops. Or so it seems."

"Do you mind if I turn on the radio?"

"Help yourself."

She leaned forward, shiny-blonde strands of long hair swaying. Her slender fingers drifted past the large FREEWHEELING knob, hovered indecisively over the black and yellow plastic buttons. Finally she chose one.

It grew dark outside; he switched on the headlights. They pierced the exterior gloom for little more than a car length. He slowed to a crawl. Then came a sudden staccato patter on the car-roof; tiny hailstones moted in the beam of the lamps.

"Flash storm," she murmured.

It grew chilly in the car. He turned on the heater. The hail turned to rain, a hard-driving deluge. The cold inside the car grew bitter. The girl wriggled closer, putting her hands under his suit jacket for warmth.

For a moment he sat perfectly still, enjoying the unexpected gesture. It had been a long time, too, since he had experienced human contact. Of any kind. He decided that he wanted the girl, but at the same time he wanted much more: the answers. And somehow he was afraid that if it stopped with the one thing, the other would be lost. He must go on talking, find out what he could while he could.

"This storm is just one more of the things I'd like to know about," he told her. "What caused it?"

"Freak weather front," she whispered, her blonde head light on his shoulder now, her warm breath stirring against the alerted flesh of his neck.

"I mean, didn't it strike you that it began right after you pushed the radio button? It's happened

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before, when I've been alone and turned on the radio, but I could never prove anything. Nothing so definite, anyhow, as that the radio buttons control the weather, or at least the weather in the vicinity of the car. But watch this." He pressed another button.

This time the change was gradual, but it *did* happen. After a few minutes the rain slowed, stopped. A late-afternoon sun the color of a ripe tangerine emerged from behind an untidy pile of green-tinged storm clouds, which seemed to be withdrawing swiftly into the horizon.

As the cold receded like an ebbtide, she sighed and sat up, not touching him any more. "Okay. I get the idea. Don't push any more buttons. What does it prove?"

"It's part of the pattern, I think. Or maybe I mean the lack of pattern. Technology gone mad. Everything either out of order or out of time. You push the MILK button, a plate of Jello pops out; the CORNEDBEEF SANDWICH button, a pile of diet pills, or a cassette cartridge of Sir Laurence Olivier doing the ghost scene. Only the car does what it's supposed to every time, but the only place to drive is on a freeway that doesn't lead anywhere."

She looked interested, but only mildly.

"This doesn't mean, of course, that everything can't be rationally explained. The freeway may not be the one around Barstow at all, probably isn't. It could be a tunnel through the earth's crust, so we're traveling as if we were riding the edge of a spoon chipping off the top of a soft-boiled egg in an eggcup. That might also explain the funny look of the weather all the time, if it's artificial."

"Can you think of any reason for an underground freeway?"

He had already noticed that their roles were unaccountably reversed; she was asking all the questions now. Yet the conversation seemed laden with promise; in fact he felt himself teetering on the very brink of the truth. He was becoming euphoric, almost exhilarated. "I suppose there might have been some kind of earthquake, some massive shift that caused part of the surface to sink and another part to cover it, like two plates stacked with a little air space trapped between. Or a nuclear war that caused the government or whoever was in charge to rechannel civilization underground, to a place already prepared. Yes, that's not quite so preposterous as the first idea, I guess. Even so, it leaves too much unexplained. Like, if it's all still here somewhere, everything transferred at once for safety, then why can't I find my way home?"

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"I see you've done a lot of thinking about this."

"What else have I had to think about all these weeks — or months — or however long it's been?"

"And in all that time you haven't come up with any theory that would fit everything?"

"Well, yes. Yes, I have. Just one. But it's maybe — too simple." He was inexplicably excited now, talking rapidly, his foot still hard on the accelerator. "All the same, it does seem to me that the only explanation that would account for *everything* is that this is a dream. Just a dream. That would take care of the series of frustrations, the improbable events, the seeming endlessness. It would explain too why I can't recall exactly what happened to start it off, that caused me to get lost and forget things, get caught here, in this vermiform appendix of time and space. If the whole scene is just a single expanded moment in my unconscious, then everything is okay and I can stop worrying. I'm probably safe at home in our house back in — whatever the name of the town is where I live. Maybe I'm in bed, with Estelle beside me, and the children asleep down the hall. Estelle is my wife. We live in the two-story white frame house with a big yard and — trees." He was suddenly afraid he was talking too much; he felt an encroaching sense of depression where a moment before had been only elation and the hope that he was arriving at last at some kind of certainty.

She spoke softly. "You mention the series of frustrations, the improbable events, the seeming endlessness as if they are ingredients only of dreams. But real life has all these, doesn't it?"

He didn't answer.

She said, "You didn't tell me your name."

He roused himself obligingly from his sudden dejection and laughed apologetically. "It sounds crazy but — I don't seem to recall that either. And somehow the registration is missing out of the car. It was the only identification left after I lost my wallet, which I didn't need anyhow after the money ran out. And no one seems to want to look at credit cards any more." He added in a lighter tone, still trying for his own sake as well as hers to re-establish the earlier mood: "It'll all come back, though — my name, the name of the town, the kids' names — as soon as I wake up."

"You remember Estelle's name well enough."

"Just one of the many inconsistencies you find in dreams."

When the tangerine sun had disappeared and it was full dark, sure enough, there was the sign that said: EXIT NEXT RIGHT. He eased off the gas pedal. The Mer-

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cury didn't seem to slow, but the speedometer dropped sluggishly. He didn't have to brake; momentum died away as they floated down the ramp and come to rest in the familiar car park.

As usual, his was the only car there although the place could easily accommodate fifty more.

She stretched and again moved over so that her body touched his. This time she slipped a hand into his trousers.

"Not here," he warned.

"Where then?"

"In the dormitory, or motel, or whatever it is. After we go through the cafeteria."

"Will you love me then?"

"Love?" For some reason her use of the word as a euphemism embarrassed him. Or perhaps she hadn't meant it as a euphemism but as a precise denotation? Either way, he was troubled. "We'd never get anywhere," he explained gently, "if we stopped for love."

"And if we don't stop, where will we get?"

"I only meant that love should be reserved for the real world. Whatever happens here has to be confined to something less — permanent. Not that it need be any less enjoyable."

When he tried to gather her closer to him, he found he was shaking uncontrollably. If she was hurt by what he'd said, she didn't show it. She didn't pull back when he tightened his embrace to try to stop the shaking. Nor did she fail to respond to his rather-too-boisterous — even brutal — ritual kiss.

They held hands and walked into the cafeteria. This time there was no attendant in the green tissue-paper uniform, no one at all. Except them. Along the fireplace wall the food in preparation was more elaborate than usual. A suckling pig rotated slowly on the spit. A row of silver chafing dishes and an enormous samovar were lined up on the counter, each with a steady blue alcohol flame warming its belly.

In the middle of the room was a table for two appointed with dazzling white napery, crystal, silver, and a small discreet sign: RESERVED.

She was delighted with the buttons on the computer-server and the surprises they produced. She pushed PIGEONS A LA TRIMOULETTE and got Bavarian cream. He pressed the ORTOLANS DROWNED IN BRANDY button and got three packages of bobbypins and a shower of brass tokens for the New York subway.

They were behaving almost like honeymooners, he thought, with their giggles over what the chutes disgorged and their furtive caresses — furtive even though there was no one to see him stroke her breast as

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he reached from behind her, pretending to help her with a high button, no one to disapprove as she turned smoothly and pressed the inside of her thigh to his. It was the fatigue that did it. They were both exhausted by the long ride, and by the tension of prospective venery.

When she took her tray to the single fancy table, he demurred. "How about the RESERVED sign?"

"How do we know it's not reserved for us?" she argued, already busily setting their things out. "Have you a match?"

"No, I'm sorry. Why do we need a match?" (None of the chutes, to his knowledge, had ever dispatched cigarettes. He had stopped smoking long ago.)

"To light the candles."

And she set about it in her determined but good-humored way — the humor composed at least partly, he knew, of faint amusement at himself for his qualms — by bringing a light all the way from the fireplace on a splinter of tinder, which she held to the wicks of the tall candles on the table. After that he didn't have the heart to object any more.

They even shared the items from the haphazard menu — a veal ragout, lobster aspic, truffle rissoles, a bottle of Chateauneuf-du-Pape — drinking from the same glass, feeding each other, finally leaving most of it on the table when they could no longer pretend to be hungry.

Even after they left the building, going through the dark passages of a landscaped park or garden, following the signs toward the sleeping rooms, her dark eyes seemed still to hold the reflection of the candlelight in their depths. She was a lovely girl all right, he thought, far too lovely for meeting in such a chaotic place.

At the building where the sleeping accommodations were, he noticed still another slight departure from the usual (if that wasn't a contradiction in terms in an environment where "the usual" itself was a constant shift to the unexpected). One of the front rooms appeared to have been made over into a lobby. It was illumined from within and a neon sign over its door directed, REGISTER HERE.

He hesitated. There had never been any desk before, any clerk. He had always just stumbled through the dark and opened a sleeping cubicle at random. The doors were never locked. And no matter which room he chose, it was never occupied by anyone else.

"Don't be silly," she said when he turned obediently in the direction of the neon sign.

"You can wait here. It's just that — well, it *says* to register, doesn't it?"

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The lighted room was indeed a motel office, with pile carpeting in marine blue and a high desk with an open register (ballpoint pen secured from pilferage by a sturdy chain). There was no one behind the desk.

Well, he could register anyway. Why not? But of course the reason was obvious. He had no name. And how about the girl? He recalled with a rush of chagrin that he had failed to inquire, so preoccupied had he been with his own troubles. He would ask her. Meanwhile he could settle the registration problem by using one of the common aliases from the lost (or temporarily misplaced) civilization, like George Spelvin. Or Etaoin Shrdlu. "Mr. and Mrs. Etaoin Shrdlu." That would do it.

He picked up the pen, but it didn't work. Not a mark. And he didn't have another. Nor a pencil. Nor any way to get one.

He was turning away when he saw the newspapers. They were spread out like a fan of playing cards on the far end of the registration desk.

In all the time he had been on the road — at least in all the time he had been "lost" — he had not seen a newspaper. Not that he'd felt especially deprived. The TV set in the room occupied his evenings. The only trouble was he had never happened to catch a newscast.

There were network commercials, stockmarket reports, vintage movies, cookery programs and "educational" sessions of all sorts, no news.

Now his eye slid down the papers, taking in the nameplates: *Alta California, Charleston Mercury, Pennsylvania Gazette, New York Commercial Advertiser, Brooklyn Eagle.* He picked up the top one on the stack and scanned its front page. A small-town sheet, the whole paper no more than eight pages. And no news here either, he saw at once, just fillers and boilerplate stories enlarged and glorified by headlines. "East-West Debacle," said the banner, and under it a lead: "The eastern entrance of the Panama Canal lies west of the western entrance on the map." A discussion of this hoary curiosity followed in several paragraphs, one of them boldface. Other front-page stories contained beauty hints, health notes, financial advice. Inside were still more confusions and anachronisms. Display ads for cars, Pears' Soap, tires, gasoline, Sapolio, and bustles. A sports column devoted entirely to a bobsledding tournament at Lake Placid. A long poem about motherhood by a poet signing herself "A. Devoted Daughter." A column-long obituary on Samuel Langhorne Clemens.

One-third of the last column on the last page was headed PER-

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SONALS. The final item here was a one-liner: "Please come home. Estelle."

He dropped the paper as if it had burst into flame, then made himself go back and read it again. Then steadied himself with both hands against the counter and read it a third time. Reason finally came to his rescue. How could he imagine for a moment this had anything to do with him? Estelle was not that uncommon a name.

She was waiting patiently for him outside one of the unlocked doors. "Sorry to be so long." He was glad to note his voice was perfectly steady, normal; he was all right now. "I was just — glancing at the evening papers. That is, I guess they were the evening papers." He opened the door, felt for the wall switch, and the motel room filled with the same clear light from an invisible source he'd become accustomed to. "You should have gone on in."

"I wanted to wait for you."

If he'd thought tonight's menu in the cafeteria a bit extraordinary, he now decided the room was even more so. Instead of the expected prim pair of twin beds covered in servicable beige-and-chocolate motel rep, a huge circular bed with a white fake-fur spread and piles of bright pillows in many colors dominated the interior. They had stumbled onto the bridal unit.

She said, "Are you going to hurt me?"

At this his breath caught. In a frenzy of guilt at this new and quite unexpected reminder of his neglect of her, he put his arms tightly around her again and rocked her gently, looked with genuine concern into her face. A clean, open, young face, almost beautiful. Yes, beautiful. "Do you mean — you haven't had any experience with a man before?" It sounded such an asinine speech the way it came out, homiletical, patronizing, pompous.

But she answered lightly enough. "How could I? I was just born today."

He remembered then, played along with her whimsy. "Of course. The womb you mentioned. It was the van. That's where you came from so suddenly. You jumped out of the back of the van." The more he thought about it, the more he liked the notion. It was just right for a girl he had met in a dream that she should have been born wonderfully alive, fully nubile, and strikingly beautiful out of a worn and dingy piece of machinery, for the van with its escaping tarp had been even older than the Mercury and quite shabby, he recalled.

She let him remove her clothing, an item at a time, the denim jacket and a dark-blue sweater, the jeans and a delicate film of underpants.

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The TV came on without warning. He wished they could shut it off and avoid its jeering sounds and mocking images, but as always with the sets in the rooms at night there was no switch or volume control, only a channel dial. The noises and shadow-pictures came and went seemingly with a will of their own. As was appropriate to the night's more luxurious furnishings, this set was no small-screen portable model placed on a bare bureau, but a huge console set built into a fruitwood period-style cabinet (Louis Quinze) which took up most of the wall opposite the bed. However, it bore the inevitable stern red-print warning: DO NO CHANGE CHANNELS.

She was tan all over, like Estelle.

Her breasts were her loveliest feature, he decided, generously full but well supported and elastic-looking, youthful, tipped with warm brown erectile tissue which against her tan suggested a richly dyed sepia print. He looked at her a long time without touching her. Then he slowly slid out of his jacket, trousers and shirt and kicked them carelessly away along with his shoes and socks.

Like a student of dance who strives to please an instructor by careful attention and emulation, she watched his movements with seeming absorption, moved in response as he kissed her throat, breasts, navel; eased trustingly backward as he pressed her against the absurd round bed, and with an amazing adroitness fitted her golden body to his pale one.

At the last possible moment for hesitation he looked at her with renewed concern for her virgin state, thinking he should perhaps offer to withdraw if she felt pain and said so, but her eyes were closed, her breath audible, shallow; she gave every indication of slipping into an ecstatic state. So he reverted to his primary, and certainly more primitive, impulse of *wanting* to hurt her, besieging, invading, volleying, subduing.

She moaned, but not (he was quite sure) in pain as her tissues tore free and they both arrived at the other side of the long, charged moment, the halcyon side, in which she opened her eyes and smiled at him, unclasped her long arms and legs from the strong embrace in which she had held him. He had in fact not realized how strong and demanding her hold had been until the release.

He said, "You make me feel young again. Not memory-young, young for the first time. Nothing has ever been this good before."

"Nor will be again, do you think?" she inquired with half-mocking concern.

"We could check it out."

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"How soon?"

"Well, right away, I guess," he said, reveling in a mysterious restoration of his resources. Only in a dream ... so they coupled again, an erotic relief carving inscribed in the circular medallion of the honeymoon bed.

Even the television managed to produce something appropriate for once. On the screen a symphony in full formal dress crashed expertly through the jungle of the overture to *Tristan und Isolde.*

Afterward the festive mood clung like vapor. He couldn't just fall asleep on the bed now, with the unsupressible television lulling his strained sensibilities, the way he did nights when he was alone. "Let's take a bath," he said.

"You mean — together?"

"Certainly. It's part of the ritual. For people like us."

The departure in sanitary accommodations was no surprise, considering the other changes wrought (he thought now) because of the singularity of this evening compared to the others. While toilet and washstand remained as usual, enclosed in a sterile cell, paper seals over the seat and tooth glass attesting on their unassailable purity, there was, in the place where the shower would ordinarily be, another door giving on a much larger bathroom.

They entered it together, walking naked down stone steps to a sunken pool, Roman style, with blue-tile lining sparkling through limpid, lukewarm water. There were even four attendants who seemed to be expecting them, young women, alike in their voluptuous lineaments all masked, all wearing harem costumes of that same diaphanous green tissue worn by the girls in the cafeteria. Something about the glossiness of their identical black hair suggested the oriental.

Pretty good for Howard Johnson, he thought, even for a dream Howard Johnson.

One pair of attendants brought the bathers soap, the other pair a set of enormous flocculent towels. Then they withdrew without having spoken a word. (Were they robots? Were the cafeteria girls also robots?)

The soap was of some odd formula which released trillions of nacreous bubbles on their skin as the two laved each other, and into the air around them, but left no residue in the water of the pool, which remained as clear as before.

She plunged under the surface, swam underwater around the edge of the pool — she was a fast swimmer, her long limbs enviably coordinated — and then suddenly sprang out onto the blue-tile bank and stood laughing down at him. It was then he noticed the faint, very

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faint striations on her otherwise smooth sides, just below the ribs and above the hipbones. He looked more closely at her belly and discovered the corroborating evidence: a suggestion of scar tissue just on the edge of the navel crater where the skin had once been pulled very tight. There had been at least one full-term pregnancy, maybe more.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No reason. Just because I still can't believe your beauty, I guess." Well, damnit, she *had* been a virgin a few minutes ago in the motel room, he could swear it. But in a dream this kind of thing can happen, he reminded himself quickly. I won't even mention it. I certainly won't mention it. "It seems unbelievable that I still don't know your name. I've been preoccupied with my own problems, sure, but that's no excuse. Who *are* you?"

"Oh, let's just say my name's been misplaced." She smiled dreamily. "Like your own. Maybe that'll make us more compatible."

"I don't think we'll have to worry about compatibility. I haven't met anyone like you in a long time. I haven't met anyone like you."

When they lay rolled together in the fluffy towels, the attendants reappeared en masse, bringing drinks on a tray, again withdrawing in silence. The strong, smoky-sweet and viscous concoction was served in tiny crystal cordial glasses. "Do you think it's an aphrodisiac?" she said.

"Bound to be," he agreed cheerfully, "to fit with the rest of the picture."

Back in the room they fell across the bed, ostensibly to rest, but their bodies moved and sealed them together again, this time in a long, cool encounter that spun itself out in time like an opium trip while the television beamed in the Tabernacle Choir doing a re-arrangement of an old Beatles record.

Then she sighed and rolled away, and with the luster of erotic sweat still covering her perfect body she said, "Do you love me?"

Here it was again. But what would it cost him to lie and make it right with her? And what difference could one more lie make in a dream that was all a lie anyway? "I love you," he said.

"It won't always be like tonight."

"No, I suppose not."

"A love affair doesn't last forever. Not at the same intensity."

He thought of Estelle and felt a need to argue the point somehow, even if the argument were slightly off the base. "Not even an affair in a dream?"

"This isn't a dream."

Something in her voice made

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him rise to an elbow, then sit up and look into her face, which wore a more serious expression than he had seen there before. "I thought," he reminded her patiently, "that when we were talking about this earlier, on the road, we decided the dream theory provided the only possible answer to all the craziness."

"You may have decided that. I know better."

He felt a surge of anger. She could be irritating, no doubt of that. "Then why didn't you tell me what you know?"

"I guess I didn't want to spoil things." She sighed again. "It's been so lovely."

"Tell me now," he ordered, more sharply than he'd intended, but he didn't take it back.

"You'll be sorry if you insist."

"I want the truth, whatever it is."

"People never really want the truth. They only think they do."

"Go on."

"Well, you have it just backward. This isn't the dream. The business about the white house and the garden is the dream. This is the reality."

He didn't say anything.

"Not just your dream, of course. It's a group fantasy, a dream for everyone, especially people who travel for a living. But there never was such a thing. Never in this world. No one ever lived like that, in a big old house on a quiet street, with trees and flowers and children growing up and a faithful woman waiting."

His mouth felt achingly dry. He could barely get the words past his throat. "How do you know?"

"I know. There never were any children. There never was any house. Except in the dream."

"But — if I believed that, I couldn't go on."

"No, probably not."

"That is — nothing would have any meaning any more. What would be the point of getting up and getting out on the road every morning?"

"What indeed?"

"I don't believe it."

"I'll prove it."

"How?"

"All we have to do is change the channel on the TV."

They both looked at the set, where two karate black-belts, one a man weighing at least three hundred pounds, the other a wraith-like wisp of a woman, were giving some kind of exhibition, matching graceful chop for graceful chop.

"There's a strict warning about not changing the channel."

"Nonsense." She was off the bed and across the room before he could stop her. "If you won't do it, I shall." She didn't do it, though. She just stood there, daring him.

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A tickle of fear was beginning to work in him, but he decided on cajolery. He looked at her naked body, then down at his own. "If you've been taking advice from a snake, better forget it. We all know where that can lead."

She smiled agreeably enough, but she clicked the channel knob anyway.

The ceiling didn't come crumbling down, they weren't suddenly transmuted into frogs. The TV screen showed a not-very-new-Mercury with a smashed grille speeding along a freeway. The camera moved in on the faces of the man and woman in the car.

"Why, it's us," he said.

"Shhh," she said. They sat side-by-side on the round bed and watched.

"Maybe you're traveling in a circle," the woman on the screen said. "Or perhaps each time it's a different place that just seems the same."

"I've thought of that," the man beside her agreed. "It would explain some of the things that go on. Like one morning finding a cinder-block wall with no gate, as if it had been built by mistake, and the next day discovering a crack in the earth instead. It might even explain why the girl in the cafeteria is never the same girl. The desert valley and the mountains always seem the same, though. So nothing quite fits ... ."

The woman on the screen nodded.

"But none of this part of it matters, you understand," the man went on. "What I really want is to get home. Have you any idea how I could do this?"

"Why don't you take a side road?"

"I can't stand any more of this," the girl in the motel room said and went over and clicked the channel button again.

"But I don't understand —"

"Wait."

This time the TV screen showed them walking out of the cafeteria and getting into the Mercury in the car park. It seemed to be morning. (Tomorrow morning?) The Mercury was refueled at the pump in the familiar way, and then they were again driving along the freeway. There was a long silence between them, a silence which was excruciatingly tension-building to the man in the motel room, and then the girl in the car turned to the man in the car and said, "What happens if you push this knob that says FREEWHEELING?"

"I don't know. I've never pushed it. But it looks dangerous, and what with the experience I've had with the radio knobs and the weather, it's always just seemed safer to leave it alone. Hey, what are you doing? Don't! Don't touch it! Stop!"

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The agitated voice from the TV screen trailed off as the camera swung away from the car and the people in it to the road ahead, as if the lens were being directed out the window on the passenger side.

Now visible on the screen was a sign: EXIT TO VILLAGE 1/4 MILE.

Both the man on the screen and the man in the motel room shouted at once this time. *"That's it! Hey, that's it!"*

Out of the television set came the sound of a motor sharply decelerating for an off-ramp turn, then the camera cut to a long view of the Mercury driving through the tree-lined streets of a town.

It is summer in the town. All the leaves are out full. Lawns are neatly clipped. Flowers are everywhere — in beds and borders, climbing fences.

The car turns into a gravel loop drive in front of a big white house and stops under the trees. The man and the woman get out and start up a brick walk toward the door of the house, but before they reach it, the door bursts open and two children rush out, a boy and a girl.

The children throw their arms around the returning couple. They shriek, "Hello, Mommy! Hello, Daddy!"

And then on the TV set in the motel room both the image and the sound suddenly fade out.

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COUNTDOWN

There's something inexorable about a countdown.

If we count upward, we can never be certain about the limit, since the series of natural numbers has no upper end. Thus, I have recently celebrated (if that's the word I want) yet another birthday. Naturally, the thought occurs to me, now and then, that there will be some limit to the number of years I will experience, but no matter how high the number reaches, I can always hope for one more.

But after all, there is a death-day somewhere in the year, as well as a birthday, even though we don't know what the death-day is in advance (or much in advance anyway — I admit we might have a sentence of execution to face, either legally or medically). If, every time your death-day came, you knew it as you know your birthday, and if you had to subtract one from the years left you, life would be unbearable. A countup can be lived with, and the thought of death can be set aside. A countdown is the crack of doom; the approach of zero leaves no room for argument.

I think that may be why there are always such difficulties among non-physicists about the speed-of-light limit. Acceleration — going

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Science

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faster and faster — is a countup, and any limit seems arbitrary and unac ceptable. If you can travel 299,776 kilometers per second, why can't you speed up a little and go 299,777 kilometers per second? If the higher num ber exists and can be written, why can't it be experienced?

That other scientific ultimate, however — the lower limit of tempera ture — is a countdown, and so it doesn't upset people. As heat is removed and temperature drops, the amount of heat finally reaches zero; tempera ture is therefore at an absolute zero, and one can't drop beyond that. When there's no more heat, there's no more heat. Zero is zero and people accept that fact calmly. I've never heard anyone suggest that maybe, if we try a little harder, we can get below absolute zero temperature.

But what gave people the idea that there was an absolute zero tempera ture in the first place?

To begin with, human beings had to be aware of differences in temper ature between sun and shade, between day and night, between winter and summer. Early on, they discovered how to make things artificially warmer by taming fire. Making things artificially colder was more difficult — one way was to rush ice from a mountain top to a valley and use that ice to keep something temporarily cold despite the surrounding warmth.

Using melting ice as a coolant produces a temperature of 0° Celsius (32° Fahrenheit), but human beings outside the tropics can experience temperatures considerably cooler than that. Temperatures well below freezing are common, and in the northern portions of continental inter iors, temperature as low as -50° C. (-60° F.) are not terribly uncommon.*

But until modern times there were no phenomena that human beings associated with cold that seemed to indicate there was some limit beyond which things could grow no colder. In fact, if we leave the world of life out of consideration, there are virtually no visible changes with cold.

Water freezes, to be sure. We all know that, but aside from that one phenomenon, there is almost nothing else. The metal tin turns to another form and crumbles; liquid mercury will eventually freeze; but neither of these changes obtrudes itself on ordinary life. Rocks, ice, air just get colder and colder — why should there be any limit to how cold?

In the last years of the 17th Century, however, a French physicist, Guil laume Amontons (1663-1705), grew interested in the behavior of gases. He

*In this article, I am simply giving temperatures without comment. The question of methods of measuring temperature, especially outside the common range, is for another article some day.

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took careful note of the manner in which a column of gas expanded as it grew warmer and contracted as it grew colder.

He was the first to make careful measurements of the changes in gas pressure with temperature. He worked with gas trapped in a container by a column of mercury. When the temperature rose and the gas expanded, Amontons added more mercury to the column, so that the added weight of mercury compressed the gas and restored the original volume. When the temperature fell and the gas contracted, Amontons removed some mercury, reducing its weight and allowing the gas to expand to its original volume. From the height of the mercury column he could measure gas pressures at different temperatures.

By 1699, Amontons discovered in this way that not only did volume grow lower as temperature did, but that pressure did so, too. What's more, he found that both the volume and the pressure decreased by a fixed percentage for every fixed drop in temperature.

In other words (to use modern terminology), suppose we begin with gas at the freezing point of water, which is 0° C. If we drop the temperature to -1° C.* then both the volume and pressure of the gas will decline by $1/x$ of its original amount. If temperature dropped to -2° C., the volume and pressure drop by $2/x$ the original amount. This went on as far down as Amontons could measure.

Amontons could see that if this loss of volume and pressure continued at a constant rate all the way down, then by the time the temperature reached a value of $-x$° C., *all* the volume and pressure of a gas would be gone. Since volume and pressure can't become less than zero, a temperature of $-x$° C. would represent an ultimate, an absolute zero beyond which temperature could not drop.

From Amonton's observations, he decided that such an absolute zero would be reached at what we would now call -240° C. (-400° F.).

Amonton's work went unnoticed, but in 1802, the French chemist, Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac (1778-1850), conducted similar experiments and made the more nearly accurate estimate that gases lost 1/270 of their 0° C. volume and pressure for each Celsius degree below zero. Since then, the estimate has been further improved, and the absolute zero of temperature is now taken to be -273.15° C. (-459.67° F.).

There is, of course, a catch to this. Some gases turn to liquids as the temperature drops, and then the "gas laws" involving pressure, volume

** We can drop below zero in this case because the Celsius zero is an arbitrary one and not an absolute.*

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and temperature, as worked out by men like Amontons and Gay-Lussac, no longer hold. If *all* gases turn to liquids when the temperature drops low enough, then notions of an absolute zero, based entirely on the behavior of gases, might well prove meaningless. The matter of the liquefaction of gases thus gained theoretical interest.

In 1803, the atomic theory was introduced by the English chemist, John Dalton (1766-1844). The matter of liquids and gases made new sense in the light of that theory.

In liquids, the atoms or atom-groupings (molecules) are in contact. When a liquid vaporizes, those atoms or molecules separate widely.

If we begin with a gas, cooling causes the atoms or molecules to subside, so to speak, and come closer together. Eventually they come into contact, at which time they stick together and the gas liquefies. If the gas were put under pressure, that, too, should force the atoms or molecules together and liquefy the gas. If you both lower the temperature *and* increase the pressure, then the liquefaction proceeds even more readily than by either change alone.

The first to use this principle and to go about the process of liquefying gases systematically was the English chemist, Michael Faraday (1791-1867). He did so by following a suggestion made by his mentor, Humphry Davy. (Later on, Davy felt Faraday gave insufficient credit to him for his part in the investigation and that helped give rise to Davy's bitter jealousy of his erstwhile assistant.)

What Faraday did was to use a strong glass tube which he had bent into a boomerang shape. In the closed bottom he placed some substance, which, when heated, would liberate the gas he was trying to liquefy. He then sealed the open end. The end with the solid material he placed into hot water. This liberated the gas in greater and greater quantity and, since the gas was in the limited space within the tube, it developed greater and greater pressure.

The other end Faraday kept in a beaker filled with crushed ice. At that end the gas would be subjected to both high pressure and low temperature and would liquefy. In 1823, Faraday liquefied the gas, chlorine, in this manner. Chlorine's normal liquefaction point is -34.5° C. (-30.1° F.). Using this method, Faraday liquefied several other gases, too.

Liquefied gases offered a new means for producing low temperatures.

Supose a gas has been liquefied under pressure. If the pressure is then lowered, the gas vaporizes. This means that the molecules of the liquid

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ıust move apart, and to do this they must gain energy. If the liquid is kept ı an insulated container, little of that energy can be gained from the out- ıde world. It must, instead, be gained from the only substance accessible - the liquid itself. In other words, as the liquid evaporates, the tempera- ıre of the portion of the liquid that remains unevaporated drops, and fur- ıer evaporation slows until heat finally reaches the liquid from the out- de environment.

In 1835, a French chemist, C. S. A. Thilorier, used the Faraday ethod to form liquid carbon dioxide under pressure, using metal cylin- ers which would bear greater pressures than glass tubes. He prepared li- ıid carbon dioxide in considerable quantity and then allowed it to escape rm the tube through a narrow nozzle. The rapid expansion of some of e liquid, evaporating into ordinary gaseous carbon dioxide, reduced the mperature of the remainder so sharply that the carbon dioxide froze. For e first time, solid carbon dioxide was formed.

Liquid carbon dioxide is only stable under pressure. Solid carbon diox- e exposed to ordinary pressures will "sublime," that is, evaporate direct- to gas without melting. The sublimation point is -78.5° C. (-109.3° F.), d solid carbon dioxide is therefore a much more efficient cooling agent an ordinary ice is. Thilorier added solid carbon dioxide to diethyl ether ıe common anesthetic, which remains liquid down to very low tempera- res). By allowing the mixture to evaporate, he managed to attain nperatures as low as -110° C. (-166° F.). The temperature countdown s moving ahead briskly.

In 1845, Faraday returned to the task of liquefying gases under the nbined effect of low temperature and high pressure, making use this ıe of a mixture of carbon dioxide and diethyl ether as his cooling med- n. Despite this, and despite the fact that he used higher pressures than ore, there were some gases he could not liquefy.

There were six of these in fact: hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, carbon noxide, nitric oxide, and methane. Faraday named them "permanent es." To the Faraday list, there might be added five more gases which he uld not have been able to liquefy had they been known in 1845 (which y were not). These were helium, neon, argon, krypton, and fluorine.

The question as to whether the permanent gases were truly permanent ıtinued to seem theoretically important in 1845. If they could not be ıefied, however low the temperature, then the gas laws applied all the down and there was an absolute zero. If they could all be liquefied at

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some temperature lower than had yet been attained, then there was n compelling reason to suppose an absolute zero existed.

But then, in 1848, the Scottish physicist William Thomso (1824-1907) who, later in life, was given a peerage and became Baron Ke vin, took up the matter from a different standpoint. The science of the modynamics (involving the interconversions of energy and work) was mak ing great strides, and, using thermodynamic principles, Thomson showe there *had* to be an absolute zero.

The energy of motion ("kinetic energy") of atoms and molecules de clined steadily with declining temperature, and, in fact, temperature only the measure of the average kinetic energy of the atoms and molecule of a given system. The decline in gas volume and gas pressure is only consequence of this loss of kinetic energy and secondary to it. The rate loss of kinetic energy with declining temperature is such that at -273.15 C. (-459.67° F.) it is zero. You can then have no lower temperature sinc you cannot have less than zero kinetic energy.

The importance of this view is that it no longer mattered whether gase liquefied or not. The loss in volume and pressure may become irrelevan once a gas becomes a liquid, but the loss in molecular kinetic energy doe not. Hence, we may view Thomson as the true discoverer of the existenc of absolute zero.

Thomson also pointed out that thermodynamic calculations were ea ier and more sensible if the temperature scale was so arranged as to begi at absolute zero. Counting upward in Celsius degrees from absolute zer we would reach the freezing point of water at a mark of 273.15° in "abso lute temperature." The absolute temperature is usually written as "°K. where the K. stands for "Kelvin." Thus, the freezing point of water (or th melting point of ice) is 273.15°K.

The Scottish engineer William John Macquorn Rankine (1820-187 introduced a variety of the absolute scale in which one counted upwar from absolute zero by Fahrenheit degrees. On this scale, the melting poi of ice is 459.67° Rank. This scale is hardly ever used — and never by scie tists.

Although the work of Kelvin robbed the liquefaction of gases of som of its theoretical importance, it substituted the lure of the countdown, setting records for lower temperatures and of initiating a race, so to speak for absolute zero.

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The race was given an important intermediate goal as a result of the work of an Irish chemist, Thomas Andrews (1813-1885), in 1869. In that year, he pointed up the importance of lowering the temperature by showing that pressure was not always useful in producing liquefaction.

Until then, it had been assumed that given enough pressure, any gas would have to liquefy at any temperature. After all, if you just squeeze the atoms and molecules close enough to each other, won't they eventually stick together so that the gas will liquefy?

Not so, said Andrews. Working with carbon dioxide, he measured the pressure at which it could be liquefied at various temperatures. As the temperature went up by small amounts the pressure required for liquefaction went up by small amounts, too, as might be expected. At a temperature of 31° C. (88° F.) the orderly progression ceased. Suddenly, even a much greater pressure than had sufficed for liquefaction at a temperature just under that mark, would not make carbon dioxide liquid.

There was a "critical temperature," apparently, above which no pressure would suffice to induce a gas to liquefy. For carbon dioxide, the critical temperature was 31° C. (88° F.), but for other gases, it might be lower.

In 1973, the Dutch physicist Johannes Diderik Van der Waals (1837-1923) supplied a theoretical explanation for the concept of critical temperature, and laboratory observations ever since have shown Andrews to have been right.

Now there was an explanation for Faraday's "permanent gases." If the critical temperatures of these gases were below the lowest temperature that could be reached in a bath of solid carbon dioxide and diethyl ether (163° K.) then applying pressure was a waste of effort.

It was no wonder, for instance, that in 1854, the Austrian physicist Johann August Natterer (1821-1901) had failed when he had placed cold oxygen under the then-enormous pressure of 3500 atmospheres. He had not liquefied it, and now there was no surprise to it. His cold oxygen was not yet cold enough to be below the critical temperature for oxygen.

As it happens the critical temperature of four of Faraday's "permanent gases," plus that of four gases not yet isolated even in 1969 is indeed well below the 163° K. mark. They are: oxygen, argon, fluorine, carbon monoxide, nitrogen, neon, hydrogen and helium.

In December 1877, the French physicist Louis Paul Cailletet (1832-1913) tackled the problem in the new fashion by concentrating on the cooling. To do this he made use of the "Joule-Thomson effect" which

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had been worked out by Thomson in 1852 in collaboration with his friend, the English physicist James Prescott Joule (1818-1889). Joule and Thomson showed that if a gas is allowed to expand, that alone consumes energy, as the molecules must move apart and overcome their own small attraction for each other in doing so.

Cailletet began by strongly compressing oxygen, which, of course, grew hot as a result, in a reverse Joule-Thomson effect. He then bathed the tube containing this compressed oxygen in cold water to extract as much heat as possible. He then allowed the oxygen to expand very rapidly, using up energy at a far greater rate than could possible be gained from the outside world. The energy that powered the expansion had to come out of the oxygen's heat, and the temperature of the gas dropped precipitously.

Cailletet managed to lower the temperature of the oxygen to such a degree that it finally liquefied, and he obtained a fog of droplets on the wall of the container. Naturally, the fog disappeared quickly as heat leaked inward, but it had been there.

He managed to do the same, later on, for nitrogen and carbon monoxide, which required even lower temperatures for liquefaction than oxygen did.

Working at the same time as Cailletet, but independently, the Swiss chemist Raoul Pierre Pictet (1846-1929) also turned the trick. He used a slightly different method, cooling compressed oxygen with liquid carbon dioxide. He managed to get the oxygen at a pressure of several hundred atmospheres and at a temperature of 133° K., a figure which was twenty degrees below oxygen's critical temperature. When he opened an escape valve to the tube containing the oxygen, a jet of liquid oxygen spurted out and, of course, rapidly evaporated.

Both Cailletet and Pictet produced liquid oxygen only momentarily. In 1883, however, two Polish chemists, Karol Stanislav Olszevski (1846-1915) and Sigmund Florenty von Wroblevski, used a combination of the methods of Cailletet and Pictet to produce liquid oxygen in quantity. What's more, they managed to cool the oxygen-containing vessels with considerable efficiency by surrounding them with other cold liquids, kept colder by evaporation. As a result, they could for the first time study the properties of the liquid forms of the no-longer permanent gases at leisure.

Wroblevski died a few years later in a laboratory fire, but Olszevski went on to prepare, in quantity, liquid nitrogen and liquid carbon monoxide.

In 1895, the German chemist Karl von Linde (1842-1934) even made

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these liquid gases into commercially-useful products.

First he compressed air, cooled it, and allowed it to expand, bringing it to a very low temperature in Cailletet's fashion. Once he had his very-low-temperature air, he led it back to bathe a tube that contained compressed air until that compressed air was at the very low temperature to begin with. He then let *that* compressed air expand and its temperature dropped from the very low level at which it was to a still lower level.

By repeating this, he was able to produce liquid air at a reasonable price in any quantities desired.

One of the investigators of low temperatures and liquefied gases in the 1890s was the Scottish chemist James Dewar (1842-1923). Like Wroblevski and Olszevski, he produced liquid oxygen in sizable quantities and studied its properties. He showed, for instance, that liquid oxygen had astonishingly strong magnetic properties, and that liquid ozone (a form of oxygen with three atoms per molecule, rather than two) likewise had them.

Dewar gave lectures at the Royal Institution, as once Humphry Davy and Michael Faraday had done (and, for a century, such lectures had been consistently attended by the cream of London society). Naturally, demonstrations involving liquefied gases were startling and impressive, and Dewar took care to give them.

To do it properly, though, he needed to have the liquefied gases easily available, but nevertheless kept in a way that wouldn't allow them to boil away too rapidly.

For that purpose, he devised a special kind of vessel with a double wall. Between the walls was a vacuum.

There are three ways in which heat can be transferred from one point to another point. One is convection, as when matter flows from one point to another, carrying its heat with it. A second is conduction, in which matter stays put but the heat travels along it from one point to another. Neither convection nor conduction is possible across a vacuum.

The third way in which heat can be transferred is by radiation. There, heat is converted into photons which leave the heat reservoir altogether and which can then move, be absorbed and reradiated, at a rate which may be slow but is never zero across any material and is even as fast as the speed of light, through a vacuum.

In the vessel Dewar designed, the side of the inner wall facing the vacuum was mirrored so that the photons were reflected rather than absorb-

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ed, thus reducing the radiation effect.

Liquid air, placed in such a "Dewar flask," would boil only slowly and would stay liquid for quite a period of time.

Dewar flasks are useful elsewhere than in laboratories. A Dewar flask that can keep liquid air cold, can also keep lemonade cold.

When Dewar flasks are used for liquid air, it is better not to stopper them since the air *is* boiling inexorably and the pressure will build up till the stopper is blown out or the flask is shattered. If, on the other hand, you place cold lemonade in the flask, you can stopper it tightly, since no gas is being formed, and then screw on a metal top that can serve as a cup when it is unscrewed.

What you can have then is the familiar "Thermos bottle," which can keep your cold liquids cold without the use of ice.

In fact, since the vacuum prevents heat from passing in either way, and since the interior of the Thermos bottle is also mirrored, hot liquids will stay hot inside. You can prepare hot coffee, put it in the Thermos, and take off on a picnic, knowing that when you are ready to drink hot coffee, you will have hot coffee — thanks to Dewar.

In twenty years, then, the temperature countdown had dropped from the 163° K. of liquid carbon dioxide and diethyl ether to the 77.3° K. which represented the boiling point of liquid nitrogen. Scientists had gone three-quarters of the way down from the familiar and everyday freezing point of water to the point of absolute zero.

At the temperature of liquid nitrogen, only three gases are left unliquefied — only three in all the Universe. One was on the list of Faraday's "permanent gases" — hydrogen. In addition, the late 1890s had seen the discovery of the noble gases, and of these, the two lightest, neon and helium, also remained gaseous even at the temperature of liquid nitrogen. They remained to be conquered — but my space is up. More next month.

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Hilbert Schenck, director of the ocean engineering program at the University of Rhode Island, has written for F&SF three superior seagoing sf stories. The first, "Three Days at the End of the World," appeared in the September 1977 issue. The third, "The Battle of the Abaco Reefs," will be coming up shortly. You are fortunate indeed to have the second in front of you; begin immediately.

The Morphology Of The Kirkham Wreck

by HILBERT SCHENCK

"The Riches of the Commonwealth
Are free strong minds, and hearts of
health;
And more to her than gold or grain,
The cunning hand and cultured brain."
Robert B. Thomas,
The Old Farmers Almanack,
1892, William Ware & Co.,
Boston, Mass.

When the three-masted schooner *H.P. Kirkham* stranded on Rose and Crown Shoal southeast of Nantucket Island on January 19, 1892, the Coskata Life Saving Crew, led by Keeper Walter Chase responded. The ensuing rescue attempt involved alterations in the local time flow of magnitudes never before observed within this continuum. Evolutionary physical forces were changed beyond the control of time-using peoples, and a fundamental question was introduced into the information matrix of this continuum, having, apparently, no resolution.

Time-using societies had always recognized the possibility that energy-users might attain significant mastery of time manipulation. Indeed, even occasional members of Keeper Chase's world group had, under the impetus of some violent or emotional event, been able to perform some limited and simple feats of time engineering, usually associated with mood and incentive control of others in the immediate situation. What became evident when the *Kirkham* stranded was that extreme-value probability theory could not set a limit on such activity by an energy-user totally motivated and having what Keeper Chase's peoples would incorrectly call a high level of "psychic" ability but what in fact is simply the ability to make information transfers within an altered time domain.

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The northern gale blew shrieking along the back of Great Point, driving the spume off the wave tops and over the bitter beach. The patrolman crouched behind a sand hill, hunched to keep an occasional swirl of snow out of his collar, staring dully out at the white and grey sea. The wind had built up through the night, and now the shreds of dawn were blowing south over Nantucket, and the wind spoke continuously of urgent death.

The beach patrol, a hulking dark figure, turned to put the blast behind him and started back towards the station where watchers in the cupola could relieve him in the light of day. It was twelve degrees above zero with the wind gusting over forty.

Inside the Coskata Station the dark, shadowed paneling glowed faintly pink, reflecting the luminous brilliance of a huge coal stove in the center of the big common room. Nyman was cookie that week, and the wheatcakes were piling up on the cook stove in the small galley under the stairs. Four men sat silent, waiting for their breakfast, not trying to speak against the whines and rattles of the wind gusts. Yet they clearly heard the telephone tinkle in the cupola. A moment later, Surfman Eldridge appeared at the top of the stairs. "Skipper? It's Joe Remsen at Sankaty Light."

Keeper Walter Chase rose in the dark glow of the station, a giant, almost seven feet tall, his huge shadow startlingly flew up to obscure the walls and ceiling as he moved in front of the ruddy stove and up the stairs.

And Surfman Perkins, toying with his coffee mug, listening to the wind snapping and keening around the station, knowing that dawn calls from the lighthouse meant only one thing, suddenly realized for the first time in his life that he might die. He coughed, sharp barks of sound contrasting with the heavy, measured tread of Keeper Chase mounting the two flights to the cupola.

"Walter Chase here. Is that you, Joe?"

"Walter!" An urgent tone. Chase sensed that time was beginning to run away from him. "Masts on Bass Rip. We saw a flare last night late, but couldn't tell where. She's leaning some. Seems steady, but it's awful far to tell."

"What's her true bearing, Joe?"

"Just about due east from us. That would put her on the north end of Bass Rip."

Keeper Chase consulted a chart and compared angles. He looked out over the station pointer with powerful glasses. "Joe, I can't make her out. She *has* to be further out. We've got forty feet here and I could sure see her if she was laying

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on Bass Rip. She's got to be on Rose and Crown. South end from your bearing."

A pause. "Well ... I don't know, Walter. I doubt we'd see her so clear that far. She may have lost her topmasts."

There was no point in arguing. Chase knew the wreck was fifteen miles out, on Rose and Crown Shoal. A sudden gust blew through the stout, government sashes and swirled its chill into the cupola. The little tower rattled and shook. Walter Chase looked out at the ragged dawn, across at Eldridge, then down at the phone. "Joe, hang on. I'm getting the surfboat ready. We'll haul to the backside and launch there. I'll be back to you before I leave the station." Chase rose, ducking his head instinctively in the small room, and slowly climbed down the ladder, his mind fragmenting, working the launch, estimating the tide rips, laying beside the stranded vessel. "Eat quick!" shouted Walter Chase down the stairs. "We got a wreck on Rose and Crown!"

The difficulty in predicting improbable, time-controlling events by energy-users stems from these peoples' unlikely and illogical motivations and perception. One might assume that Keeper Chase's need to "defeat" the seas of the Nantucket South Shoals flowed from some sense of vengeance or hatred on his part resulting from the loss of a loved parent or a woman in some sea disaster. In fact, Keeper Chase suffered no such loss. Distant family members had, through the years, died on various whaling and trading voyages, but they were only names to Keeper Chase with little emotional attachment. Yet where the winter storms easily broke and ruined other capable men, for Keeper Chase the natural variation of wind and sea, so implacable and daunting to most of Chase's world group, only resonated with his self-image. In essence, Chase did not strongly believe in the "God" concepts so typical of energy users, but he strongly believed in a "Devil," that is, the continual temptation of his world group by easy choices and safe paths. Keeper Chase saw the variability of the ocean as a natural test of behavior, as a kind of "Devil's assistant." That this naive motivation coupled with his great physical strength and the urgent and marginal situation at the stranded *Kirkham* should have produced such an unprecedented control over time flow cannot now be understood. Keeper Chase's meaning and purpose in this continuum thus remains inexplicable, as in fact, he himself was to realize.

Surfman Flood ducked around

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the corner of the station, finally relieved of the wind blast at his back. He saw the stable door was open and, in the dim interior, Perkins and Gould were fastening a long wooden yoke across the neck of the silent ox. Harness bells tinkled, sound pinpoints in the rush and scream of the wind. Flood's heart seemed hollow. "Where's it at?" he asked at the door.

Josiah Gould peered from under his slicker hat. "Rose and Crown."

Flood sighed. "Fifteen miles downwind."

"Ayeh. Better get some breakfast."

Flood pushed open the station door and felt the relative warmth and stillness of the dark interior suck at his resolve. Nyman was steadily lifting forkfuls of flapjack into his mouth, alternating with steaming coffee from a huge cup in his left hand. Across the table was Flood's place set with a heaping meal.

"We got some rowin' to do, George. Better feed your face quick," said John Nyman. As they ate, rapidly and silently, the two wide doors of the apparatus room opened on the other side of the station, and swirls and draughts of chill rushed everywhere. They heard the shouts and tinkles as the stolid ox was backed over the sills and the harness lashings connected to the surfboat cart.

"Gawd, John, hits just awful on the beach!"

Nyman grinned and winked in the dark, chilling room. "The govinmint only pays you to go out, George," he said quoting the old wheeze. "You got to get back any way you can."

"Fifteen miles to windward! Hell's delight, we won't row a hundred yards in this smother!"

They heard Keeper Chase's deep voice in the apparatus room as the creak of the wheels signaled the surfboat's movement out into the wild dawn. He came into the common room and looked at the two men. "You fellers follow across the neck when you're finished and bring back the ox. I'm going to call Joe Remsen at Sankaty and have him order a tug from Woods Hole. We hain't going to row very far in this blow after we get them fellers off the wreck." "Amen," said Surfman Flood under his breath. The wind was penetrating everywhere in the station and the commotion was restless and insistent.

Walter Chase climbed back up into the cupola and cranked the phone magneto.

"Sankaty Light, Keeper Remsen."

"Joe, Walter Chase again. We'll be launching pretty quick. Can you still see her out there?"

"Hang on ... yep. No change in

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her heel, as far as I can tell."

"Joe, will you call the town and have them telegraph Woods Hole for a tug. I think this storm's got another day to run, and we just hain't going to row back against it."

"Walter, I'll do my best ... them salvage fellows ... they're hardly what you'd call heroes, you know."

Walter Chase grinned in the dark tower, which was suddenly shaking like a wet terrier. "Rats, vultures, buzzards, and skunks is what I usually hear them called, Joe. But we'll get back. Listen, Joe, I'm taking a line and drail. Might be some squeteague in those shallows in this rough weather."

But Joe Remsen made no sudden answer. He had rowed in the surfboat with Walter Chase under old Captain Pease when the Coskata Station had opened eight years before. Together, they had worked the wreck of the infamous brig *Merriwa,* manned by a crew of New York City thugs who attempted to shoot up the station soon after they were landed. Walter Chase and an ax handle had secured the pistols, and then he and Joe had gone with them, now drunk as lords, to town in Wallace Adams' catboat. And Joe Remsen, feeling the tough and solid tower of Sankaty Light vibrate as a thin scream of icy air pierced the solid masonry, smiled in spite of himself, remembering the lunch at the American House. One of the drunken hoodlums had shoved his hand under a waitress's dress, and she had let him have a full tray of food plumb in the face. Back-to-back, he and Walter Chase had fought the six of them, chairs flying, crockery smashing everywhere. Joe Remsen's throat had a catch. He had to say something. "Walter ... old friend, take care ... God bless."

The walk across the neck took only a few blustery minutes, and Walter Chase met Nyman and Flood midway in that walk leading the ox home. Chase strode through the tidal cut between two high dunes, and the full wind caught his slicker and blew it suddenly open so that for a moment he seemed impossibly huge in the grey, fitful light. The surfboat lay above high water, and the men around it huddled together, their backs against the cutting wind.

Surfman Jesse Eldridge was Number One in the Coskata crew. He walked, hunched and stolid, to Walter Chase. "It's going to be a tough launch, Skipper. Them waves are running almost along the beach," he shouted.

Chase nodded. "We're getting some lee from Point Rip, Jesse, but we'll have to launch across them, hold her head to the east. Otherwise, we'll be back ashore before we know it." They watched the break-

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ing curls running toward them from the north.

Nyman and Flood came back, and the men, three on a side, began to shift the surfboat into the backwash. The wind blustered at them. "We got to go quick ... when we go, boys!" shouted Walter Chase.

The blow was slightly west of north, but the waves were running directly south and meeting the beach at a sharp angle. "Take her out about nor'east!" shouted Walter Chase. "Ready ... . Now, jump to it!"

The six men lifted the boat by its gunwales and ran into the waves. A large group had passed and now the nearshore was a confused and choppy mess. The leading surfmen, Cathcart and Perkins, were almost up to their waists, and over the sides they vaulted, lifting and dropping their oars in the rowlocks. Now Gould and Nyman scrambled in, then Eldridge and Flood. Walter Chase pushed the surfboat out alone, deeper in, and now a curl appeared more from the east than the others and slapped the surfboat's bow to port back towards shore. Walter Chase moved his right hand forward along the starboard gunwale and pulled sharply. The twenty-three-foot boat gave a hop and her bow shifted eastward again. Then Chase was gracefully over the stern and the men were rowing strongly while he put out the long steering oar. They were clear of the shore break and moving into deeper water. Yet, even here, the waves were huge, rolling by under the boat and now and again breaking unexpectedly under the keel or beside them as they pulled together.

George Flood, cheerful and round-faced, was rowing port oar next to Jesse Eldridge. "Say, Skipper," he shouted up at Walter Chase. "I'm sure glad your ma never stinted you food. We must have been in a fathom of water before you climbed in."

Walter Chase thought a moment. "Actually, George, I hain't all that big, as Chases go," he boomed. "My great uncle, Reuben Chase, was harpooner with Cap'n Grant on the *Niger*, and he went over seven feet. They claimed he could play a bull walrus or a whale on a harpoon line like you or I would a blue or striped bass." Chase paused, then ... "Course, that would be a *small* whale, you understand."

Josiah Gould, seated directly ahead of Eldridge, lifted his head, his huge mustache blowing every which way. "Hain't that awful!" he yelled. "He's not just taking us out here to catch our death from pee-nu-monia, but now we're going to listen to more of them Chase family lies too!"

Flood grinned over his shoulder and shouted back. "Them's not ex-

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actly lies, Josiah. Them's what's called 'artistic license.'"

Walter Chase looked benignly at Flood, his small eyes bright and his sideburns wild and full in the whipping wind. "I wisht I had your education, George. It's a plain wonder how you fellers with schooling can call one single thing by so many names. Now my daddy always said there was just three kinds: plain lies; mean, dirty, awful lies; and what's in the Congressional Record."

Gould and Nyman looked sideways at each other, winking. If they could get Skipper Chase going on them "govinment fellers," it would be a short and cheerful run to Rose and Crown.

But the wind was worse. They were completely clear of any lee from Great Point. Even Chase's huge voice would be torn away and mutilated. "We're... far enough... out! Get... the sail up!" The four stern oarsmen continued to row, now more northerly into the teeth of the blasting wind. Cathcart and Perkins brought their oars inboard and wrestled the sail, tied in a tight bundle, out from under the thwarts and up into the wind. With Gould's and Nyman's help they finally stepped the mast and then unfurled and dropped the small, lateen rig. It caught and filled with a snap, and Walter Chase wrenched the steering oar so hard to port that it described a long arc between the water and the steering notch in the transom. The boat darted off. Eldidge manned the sheet, and the other men huddled on the floorboards, their heads hunched inside the thick issue sweaters and stiff slickers.

Chase, at the steering oar, and Eldridge, on the stern thwart, had their heads close together; and now, running with the wind on the stern quarter, they could suddenly speak less stridently.

"I'm going to head for the lightship south of Great Round Shoal, Jesse," said Walter Chase, his arms in constant motion. "If it comes on to blow worse, we'll just have to go on board her. If we decide to keep going, we'll lay off sou'east and run down to Rose and Crown."

Eldridge was silent, then: "When do you figure we decide, Skipper?"

Chase looked at the jagged seas, whitecaps everywhere to the horizon. "Much beyond the Bass Rip line, we could never fetch the lightship. This lugger hain't much to windward."

The two men looked out ahead as the surfboat, heavily driven, wallowed and yawed and fought the pull of Walter Chase and his tough hickory steering oar.

Now they were three miles out, and looking south, Walter Chase

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saw that Bass Rip was clear and that the wreck was certainly on Rose and Crown. "We got to decide, Jesse," said Walter Chase.

Surfman Eldridge looked down at his high gum-rubber boots and nodded. "It hain't got worse, Skipper."

Chase's small eyes glittered. "Let out the sail, Jesse," he said, and the surfboat bounced and slapped and rolled, but now it was better for the waves were astern. Off they dashed southeast, surfing down the long rollers in the deep water, then struggling up the shifting water hills. Between the Bass Rip line and McBlair's Shoal, Walter Chase first saw the masts of the wreck. She was at the south end of Rose and Crown, probably in that one-fathom spot there, and leaning to the south perhaps twenty degrees. He headed a bit more southerly and they left the choppy white smother of McBlair's Shoal behind.

Now the three masts were clearly visible. The vessel lay roughly east and west with her stern to Nantucket. She had struck and then bilged, and now the waves were breaking cleanly over her. They had driven the hull over to starboard so that a spectacular line of surf would suddenly appear all along her port side that canted up to face the seas. They were too far away to count the men but Chase could see dark forms in the ratlines. He peered intently at the wreck. Was it shifting now? It was a bad stranding! If she were facing the seas, even quartering, but broadside they were wrenching her. And the tide was coming. The seas would enlarge and she'd be hit even harder. Chase peered and peered at the wreck, and the surfboat drove along the line made by his eyes.

Chase Two was aware of the *H.P. Kirkham* in a total sense. She was not going to stay together any longer. Chase Two detected unbalanced forces within the ship-sand-wind-water field matrix. He penetrated the force structure around the *Kirkham,* but there was no TIME! The surfboat was running down the seas. The *Kirkham* was twisting as the combers, steepened and shortened by the shoal, boarded her with shuddering blows. Chase Two clinched, and time flowed more slowly. The waves moved like molasses. The shocks were stretched out, and he could trace the force imbalances. SLOWER! He could not speed the finite duration of impulses flowing between his billions of neural cells, but he could slow time and process data that way. Fiercely he clenched. Time, he realized, could be traded for information. He saw the *Kirkham* completely, and yet simultaneously in every relevant detail. The mizzen mast was shaky,

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split. Not much had shown on the mast's surface, but now the stick was resonating with the wind, and the splitting was worse. It would soon bring down the main and foremast, and the men as well.

There was no solution within the energy matrix alone, and neither time nor information domains extended directly into the energy system. The mast would have to be replaced.

Chase Two stooped like a hawk down the *Kirkham's* time line. He saw her leave Rose and Crown Shoal and flow backwards to Halifax and leave her lading. Then faster, backwards to other voyages in her brief year of life. Now the masts were out and the hull was coming apart on the stocks of a boatyard near the tiny town of Liverpool on the south coast of Nova Scotia. The masts suddenly grew branches, and, in a twinkling, Chase Two watched a French timber cruiser looking up at a tall pine deep in the Nova Scotia forests. The cruiser turned to his associate, the shipyard boss's young son on his first wood-buying trip into the woods. "By gar, dat's one fine tree, eh?"

The young man nodded. It was the tallest in the area. But now Chase Two showed the Frenchman something he had not seen before, that other time. The tree had been struck by lightning. The scar was grown over, but you could just make it out curling from the top and disappearing around the trunk.

"Look," said the timber cruiser. "Dat tree been struck. We walk around." And on the other side they saw the faint scar traveling down to the ground. "Risky, dose ones," said the Frenchman in a superior way. "Hmmmmm." And as he looked around, Chase Two showed him a shorter but perfectly branched mast tree on the other side of the clearing, and the French cruiser pointed and smiled. "Not so beeg, dat one, but plenty tough, I teenk."

And back down the time line, Chase Two dropped like a stone. He saw the new mizzen erected on the Liverpool ways, then, faster and faster, the loading and unloading and movement until the *Kirkham* again struck on Rose and Crown Shoal, bilged, and lay through the stormy night with her men in her rigging.

When Keeper Chase learned that informational and temporal entropy flows could be interchanged, his power to influence events grew at an unprecedented pace. In the course of replacing the *Kirkham's* mast, Keeper Chase solved a variety of hydrodynamic and structural problems of extreme

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complexity and entirely by inspection and processing of data. Much more significant, he dealt surely with the philosophical and practical problems of time-information interchange and realized that if time flow could be slowed, it could be controlled in other ways. His ability to arrest time flow within his local region was now so pronounced that a detectable chronologic entropy gradient existed within the entire continuum.

The surfboat blew down on the stricken schooner from the north, heading directly for her battered port side where white spume flew up twenty feet or more when a big wave took her full on.

"You bow men," shouted Walter Chase. "Get the anchor ready." The positioning had to be done correctly the first time. There would be no clawing back up from the schooner's lee to reanchor if they did it badly. Walter Chase watched the choppy, surging space shorten between the surfboat and the schooner. The current was running to the northeast with the wind a bit west of north and the waves about from due north. He decided to anchor upwind of the vessel's stern and then lay back south and easterly to come under the mainmast and her center ratlines where the crew was now clustered.

Chase's small eyes gleamed in the grey, dull light. He watched the distance shorten and the schooner widen and her masts grow up and, in them, the men now clearly seen.

"Watch your head, Jesse!" shouted Walter Chase. "We're rounding up now!" He put the steering oar hard over, and again it formed a bow of iron-hard hickory, arched against the forces that drove the boat halfway around, heeling and wallowing wildly until it faced the screaming wind and sharp seas. "Anchor over!" shouted Walter Chase, then, "Oars out, all of you!"

They were up on the thwarts holding her head against the wind as she slipped back with Perkins paying out the anchor line over a smooth, maple cleat. The surfboat lay on her tether about southeast, and Walter Chase guided her back and back until they were a few yards from the schooner and just beyond where the big rollers broke and shuddered the vessel all along her length. The surge was ten feet or more. The surfboat lay down in a trough, and they could look up and see several feet of the schooner's side, then up until they were above the rail and a great wave was sliding out from under them and creaming white and lovely over the vessel's port rail in a burst of foam and a sound of roaring and groaning that made Walter Chase flinch his cheek muscles, for he knew how weak the schooner was.

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Chase cupped his hands and bellowed directly into the wind. "Perkins, throw them the heaving stick."

Perkins heard and readied the stick and its loops of line. The surge picked the surfboat up, and as they came level with the schooner's rail, Perkins hurled the stick into the rigging, with the thin line paying smoothly out behind in a graceful arc. One of the crew crawled up the ratlines to where the stick was entangled in the shrouds and turned towards the surfboat.

"You...bend a line on that! Use your topsail clew line." The roar of Walter Chase's voice flew downwind, and, in moments, the clew line was fast to the stick, and back it came, hand by hand, through the smother to Perkins, who bent it on the same cleat as the anchor warp.

The other end of the clew line was in the hands of the sailor and two others who had crawled over to join him. Walter Chase shouted again. "Tie that line to a shroud, you men!"

They stared stupidly at him, and sudden spray flew up in their faces. Walter Chase turned back to Perkins. "Start to haul in on that slowly. You rowers, ease us towards her side."

But the schooner's crew had waited long enough and they, or three of them, began to pull fiercely on the clew line themselves. Walter Chase felt the boat jerk roughly towards the schooner and begin a deep roll broadside in a trough. He crammed the steering oar violently over and spun around, pointing at the schooner. "Stop hauling! Stop, I say! Make your end fast. If you make one more pull on that line, we'll cut it!" And as he spoke, Chase pulled a big clasp knife from his slicker pocket and opened the blade with a snick that pierced the duller voice of the gale. Then he passed the big silver knife forward to Perkins, who brandished it above the clew line. The men on the schooner saw the great dark figure with the knife and heard the huge voice driven down by the wind, and they tied off the line and huddled, dully watching the Coskata crew, using both rope and oars, begin to move towards the wreck.

Suddenly, the schooner shuddered and, inexplicably, rolled to windward. She came almost upright and then went back over to starboard, stopping her breathtaking swing at the same list as before. The mizzen gaff snapped off and fell, thudding against its mast on the way down. The schooner began another roll to port, and Perkins looked directly at the men in the ratlines, and his eyes and theirs met. He remembered a Sunday six years ago when, after church, he and his mother had driven in the wagon over to Little Mioxes Pond

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were, everyone said, a large vessel had blown ashore. They had spent the day with hundreds of others watching the men in the rigging, too weak to grasp the lines shot over the vessel by the surfside crew, falling one after another into the raging sea. The vessel had stranded well out so the crew were only small black figures and they did not move very much when they fell, but Perkins never after that time shot another crow or grackle with the .22 Winchester pump that his mother had saved for a year to buy him. Even if they were just birds, they fell the same way, black against the far sky. And now these men were about to fall, blackly still, but he would see their eyes clearly this time.

"Gawd help us, Skipper! She'll shake her sticks out!" shouted Perkins in a choking, coughing voice, strident with terror.

Walter Chase had followed that roll with bright, keen eyes. She could not withstand much more of that! "No!" he said sharply.

Chase Three surveyed the flow field under the wreck and processed the observations. He clamped intensely on the time flow, and the *Kirkham* was motionless in a sea of stationary fluid and a sky of stationary wind. He explored the flow characteristics of the near shores in every particular, considering the special character of the *Kirkham's* fields of forces. The current, shifting clockwise during the flood as it did in the area, had undermined the sand bed on which the *Kirkham* lay. But worse, the current, now running more and more counter to the wind, was moving the hull as well.

Chase Three considered how the force and energy relationships could be corrected. The wind was beyond manipulation, deriving as it did from such a disparate mass of variables as to make significant time-based alteration impractical. But the flows of gravity and wind-driven water were another matter. As Chase Three studied these fields of flow, he gradually realized that the natural relationships allowed a bifurcation within the viscosity functions. There were at least two flow-field configurations that had equal probability and, most important, either could exist with no change in total energy level within the continuum. The present field system allowed a strong easterly current to move in over the shoal against the *Kirkham,* but with the alternate field the flow would be slightly damped and diverted more northerly, and the wind force on the schooner would be sufficient to hold her against the sand and damp the roll forces.

Since there was no energy gradient involved, Chase Three immediately altered the continuum to

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the new flow field, this information gradient being offset by the altered time flow in the local area. The *Kirkham* shuddered but did not roll again.

With his introduction of the Chase Field into the information matrix of our continuum, Keeper Chase was reaching the peak of his astonishing powers. That any alternate description of the fluid-dynamic field existed was not even known, and that Keeper Chase should have found a solution at equal energies was quite marvelous. He did not, when utilizing time-information entropy balances to make the shift, consider that these same laws govern the development and evolution of galactic and supra-galactic motion and that the field shift must occur there as well. Thus, Keeper Chase, in addition to sustaining an extraordinary temporal gradient within the continuum, had now inadvertently but irrevocably altered the way in which the energy universe would develop. Those time-using peoples who existed outside the gradient now convened and considered the immediate situation. We too could work within altered time, but the randomness of what was occurring put us beyond normal information transfer procedures. The storm on the Nantucket South Shoals had spawned a gradient storm in time itself. If the rescue attempt should become unlikely within any statistically allowed alternate energy structure, we would have to consider Keeper Chase's reaction to that perception and what an impossible, but certainly powerful reaction by Keeper Chase to breach the energy-time-information barriers would cause within these boundaries.

Perkins, bent in a fit of coughing, saw that the schooner was stationary again. "Cathcart," shouted Walter Chase. "Bend a bowline in our painter and get ready to heave it over."

Now they edged closer, hanging like a lunging pony against the whipping anchor line. "Throw!" shouted Chase and the line flew across. "One man at a time," shouted Chase down the screaming wind to the schooner. "Put that bight around your waist."

A large, hulking Negro who had caught the painter passed it to a smaller figure, evidently the cabin boy. The youngster put the line over his head and waited, staring frozenly into the wind.

"Now..." and Chase's voice boomed under and around the wind's cry. "When I say jump, you come! You hear!"

The boy nodded, staring out at the marching lines of water foaming towards them.

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"Cathcart, haul us in a bit.... Now, steady boys!" The surfboat was caught by a comber and lifted, up and up, and the wave was pushing the boat towards the schooner. They were on the peak and the curl was slipping past.

"JUMP!"

The boy flung himself off the ratlines, his legs flailing. Cathcart and Perkins handed in the painter as he fell, thudding, into the space between the bow and center thwarts. "Ease that bow line quick!" shouted Walter Chase, and the surfboat lay off to the east before an early break could turn them over at the schooner's rail.

The boy looked up from the floorboards, his ankle hurting, his teeth chattering; and over him loomed a gigantic figure, sideburns wild and blustery, eyes small and intensely bright, beacons against the wild grey sky. "We count six more, son. Have you lost anyone yet?"

Somehow the boy was able to speak. "Nossir. Seven in all. The cap'n... the cap'n ain't so well. We ...we been in the rigging since eight last night. Gawd, it's ..."

"What ship?" asked George Flood, turning suddenly around.

"*H.P. Kirkham,*" said the boy. "From Halifax with fish. Bound to New York."

Walter Chase stood up. "Let's get the next one. You starboard rowers, bring us in slow. Cathcart, bring her head in."

Each time, they approached the *Kirkham* and waited for the proper wave to lift them up and slide the boat close. Then a black tumbling figure would come down into the surfboat every which way, limp with fear and exhaustion and dazed by the sudden, unexpected hope.

Now there were three left and the surfboat rolled more heavily and more water slopped over the gunwales. "Sir," shouted the cabin boy. "I think the cap'n's coming next. They're going to have to sort o' throw him."

Walter Chase peered at the three figures in the ratlines. The wind had slackened a bit and it seemed brighter. He could see an old man, conscious but unable to hold his head up, supported and held against the ratlines by a huge Negro and another big man in bulky clothes. "Josiah... Johnny.... get ready to help when this fellow comes across."

The center rowers shipped oars and waited. Cathcart carefully pulled them in, a bit at a time. Then he cleated the clew line and hurled the painter back across the foamy gap. They put the loop over the old man's head and shoulders. The boat was rising. "Get ready!" shouted Walter Chase to the three men. "Now!"

The two men threw the captain feet first into the boat. He came

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down crossways, catching John Nyman across the cheek with his fist as he fell. His head thumped a thwart and he slumped, a bundle of rags, into the bottom of the boat.

Walter Chase quickly knelt and lifted the old man's head. "Keeper Walter Chase. Coskata Life Saving Station. Can you understand me, Captain?"

The old man, his whiskers white with frost and brown with frozen tobacco juice and spittle, stared back unseeing. "Aye. Captain McCloud, master, *H.P. Kirkham* out of Nova Scotia. Thank God...."

Chase's eyes pierced the old man's own eyes, and he nodded. "Captain McCloud. We cannot save your vessel. She is breaking up and this storm will grow worse by nightfall."

"I know," said McCloud and his head fell forward and his eyes shut and he shivered in cold and pain and despair. Then... "This bloody, foul, awful coast!" His eyes briefly lost their dullness. "Worse than Scotland! Worse than the Channel! These rotting shoals stick out so bleeding far... God Almighty..." The effort exhausted him. He did not speak again.

The next man was the first mate, hard, grizzled, Cockney-tough enough to sit up after his bump and stare at the young, slender Perkins, bent over in a fit of coughing. "Well, you blokes don't look like bloody much, but you bloomin' well know your business out here!"

And on their final surge up over the schooner's rail the huge black crewman flew between the great and little boats with a sudden grace, and he, like the mate, sat up immediately and peered about from huge white eyes. But he said nothing.

"Now, lads," boomed Walter Chase, as the surfboat lay off easterly, bobbing and pitching in the smother like a logy cork. "Oars out. We got to clear this shallows afore the wind comes on. Lively now."

The four stern oarsmen pulled mightily while Perkins and Cathcart heaved on the anchor warp. Slowly they moved to windward, their efforts sending rivers of sweat inside the heavy sweaters and slickers in the twelve-degree, forty-knot blast.

"Anchor up, Skipper!" shouted Cathcart while Perkins suddenly bent double, both hands over his mouth.

Walter Chase looked back, his side whiskers black spikes, his huge slicker masking the *Kirkham*. He hated to give the gale an inch, but to get past her stern to the west would be a near thing, and the wind was rising again. He put the steering oar over and they fell off on a big soft wave to starboard. "Pull, boys, we got to stay ahead of these combers."

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They rowed eastward, then more southerly and cleared the *Kirkham's* smashed and sagging bow by forty feet. Walter Chase put his oar to starboard and they pulled under the schooner's lee. It was easier there. The schooner was acting as a breakwater, taking the big ones before they reached the surfboat, and they pulled strongly to the west, the wind hard and vicious on their starboard quarter and the sea confused and breaking everywhere, an endless mouth filled with shifting teeth.

But once beyond the schooner's length it was impossible. Chase put her more towards the south, taking the wind on the beam with the current still northeast and running those great, curling rips in the very shallow spots.

"Jesse," said Walter Chase leaning forward. "We got to clear this shoal afore the high tide this afternoon. Them rollers'll start to break and we couldn't lay at anchor. And the wind's making up again. Them clouds are coming back."

Jesse Eldridge only nodded. He was pulling too hard to talk. They were moving southeast, but only barely. The *Kirkham* was close behind them and the surfboat was slopping about, taking splash on every wave.

Walter Chase looked at the men they had rescued. His little bright eyes fixed on the first mate and the Negro, their heads buried in coats against the chill. "You fellers Yank that sail and mast out of there and pitch it over the side. Our sailing days are done!"

The men moved slowly, as best they could, helped by a hand from this or that rower, and finally the outfit went over the side in a piecemeal fashion, trailing astern and finally pulling loose.

George Flood looked up and winked at Walter Chase. "Skipper," he panted, "how you going to explain throwing that valuable govinmint property over the side to the inspector?"

Walter Chase, at that moment fighting a great, half-breaking wave that threatened to broach the surfboat, suddenly winked a gleaming eye back. "George, I'll just tell that feller that we met this here bureaucrat adrift on his very own desk looking for Washington, D.C., and we just plumb did the Christian thing and loaned him our sail."

Charles Cathcart, leaning intently forward as he pulled, burst into a roar of laughter. "Hell's fire Skipper! They'd just say you didn't get him to fill in the right forms."

Perkin's oar trailed astern and he leaned over the side, vomiting and coughing great, deep, sharp barks above the gale. Cathcart reached towards him, and the surfboat lost way and began to bounce

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and shift southerly into the troughs. Walter Chase looked piercingly at his men. They *must* clear the shoal now. It would only get worse.

Chase Four entered Perkin's continuity of self-awareness. The boy was sick, probably pneumonia, for his lungs were very wet. He was beaten. The cockney mate's praise had got him through the anchor recover, but now he was completely involved with his cough and nausea.

Chase Four dropped down Perkin's time line seeking a point that would reverberate with the *Kirkham* rescue ....

Each year on the last day of July along the islands, the life-saving crews return from a two-month off-duty period to a ten-month routine of patrols and watches. On that night the previous summer, the Coskata crew had produced their usual party. They had hired a banjo and violin from town, asked their wives, relatives, friends, and suppliers to the festive evening, and cleared out the dark apparatus room of its large gear. Colored streamers hung from the suspended life car, and festoons of bouys made arches beneath which the dancers turned. The girls, slim and pretty in ankle-length dresses, puffed sleeves, and swinging hair ringlets, smiled at the tall men in their government blue. Before the light went, they trooped outside to the breeches bouy training tower, and the girls climbed, one above the other up the ladder, and all looked back smiling while George Flood pressed his Kodak button and gave a happy shout.

But the prettiest there was Abigale Coffin with Roland Perkins. When the others returned in the dusk to the laughter and screech of the fiddler's bow, he caught her arm. "Let's go look at the ocean, Abby," he said. She was the nicest girl in the town, always smiling; her eyes so bright and full; and as they walked away from the station, Perkins could barely breathe, his chest was so full of love and hope. "Abby ...could I... would you...?" and he leaned toward her and brought his other arm up behind her back.

Chase Four did not wait for the sharp and hurtful reaction; he had skimmed by it once. Instead, he showed Abby Coffin that Roland Perkins was actually a fine, handsome boy. As she looked at him, she realized how sensitive and brave he would always be, how good and gentle his thoughts were toward her. She turned her face upward and they kissed. Later, under a bright moon, she said breathlessly, "Yes, you can touch me there, Roland."

Perkins, his coughing fit mastered, nodded at Cathcart and be-

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gan to row strongly. Walter Chase urged them on. "We got to make some depth, boys." Perkins, grinning to himself, pulled and pulled. He knew they would get these men back. Chase was too good a boatman to fail, whatever the wind. They would all get government medals. And he thought of Abby and the medal and how she would hold him when he told her. Slowly the surfboat left the *Kirkham* behind.

George Flood's eyes popped open. "Look back quick, Skipper!" he shouted. Walter Chase spun around. In that instant, the *Kirkham* was dissolving. Her foremast was halfway down, with her main following. The taut and snapping shrouds ripped the quarterboards completely off the starboard side, and the deck buckled in several large pieces. The mizzen fell, and before it struck the water, the entire hull had disappeared. She had gone like smoke in a gale. Flood looked up at Walter Chase. "Dang lucky we didn't wait for another cup of coffee at the station, Skipper!" he shouted.

Walter Chase, fighting the steering oar continually in the heavy and confused seas, still stared back at the unchecked rollers now streaming over the *Kirkham's* last berth. They had taken the last man off less than an hour before. His eyes narrowed and he wondered about the rescue. Everything was so damn near, so chancy.

The Coskata crew rowed and rowed on Rose and Crown Shoal. Sometimes the boat moved west and sometimes it paused and pitched. Noon was past and the sky had darkened again. The wind was rising with the tide, but they were slowly getting into deeper water, into the twelve-fathom channel that cut aimlessly between Rose and Crown and Bass Rip. The waves were longer and not so steep, but the wind was too heavy. They were hardly moving and the men were exhausted. And the current had revolved almost due easterly and was actually setting them back away from Nantucket. This would have to do for now.

"Cathcart! We got to anchor. Handy now!" They lay back with the winds hammering their starboard quarter, all the scope they could muster laid out to their biggest anchor. The men slumped over their shipped oars while Walter Chase shoved the steering oar this way and that, using the current run to steer his boat up and over the combers. The wind was building again and its scream and slash was icy and terrible. Jesse Eldridge, hunched in a nest of sweaters and slicker, looked up at Walter Chase. "Skipper, we didn't even make a mile in three hours. You think that tug'll get out here?"

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"I figure he will as long as he thinks there might be some loot on the schooner, Jesse," said Walter Chase. He sensed, in fact, that the tug would not come into these wild shoals. Bitterly he thought of the wonderful strength of her cross-compound steam engine driving that big powerful screw. Yellow, rotten cowards! What was the point of even building such a vessel if you could not find men to man it? The surfboat jumped and tugged at the snapping anchor line. While the crew bailed as the spume and spray came in on them with every wave. Perkins and Cathcart gently tended the anchor line, wrapping it in rags, shifting it a few inches now and then to relieve the chafing.

The sky grew darker as the afternoon wore on and the wind built up again. There was so much agitation and violent activity, so many unexpected swoops and thumps, so many waves that appeared from odd directions and with surprising steepness.

Chase pulled and fought the oar, staring out at the screaming bowl of energy around him while a coldness and fierceness steadied his heart and mind. He would bring these men home, all of them. Nothing anywhere was more important than that. The tug, the life-saving service, the men at their desks in Washington and Boston, the sea and its commerce, the life cars and motor-driven surfboats, the rescues of the past and future, men adrift on the seas of the world and foundering forever in the gales and currents along the coasts, meant nothing beside these few in the Coskata surfboat. He focused his great strength on this single purpose and found a balance between the forces of the storm and his own resolve. They pitched and waited in the freezing blast for the tide to turn.

Dusk comes early to Nantucket in January, and it was almost dark by the time the surfboat had swung clockwise on her tether and now lay a bit west of south. Chase knew they had to go whenever the tide could drive them, and he shouted and joshed the men. Tiredly they put out oars, pulled up the anchor, then struggled off to the west. Chase used his rowers to hold a northerly set, counting on the southeast current to give them a general westerly direction. They took plenty of slop with the waves on their starboard bow, and Chase urged the *Kirkham's* mate and her black crewman to bailing. The boat moved into deeper water, and as the night came on, Chase suddenly saw, on the very rim of his world, the tiny, flashing point of Sankaty Light.

"Hey, boys!" he shouted. "There's old Sankaty and Joe Remsen having fried bluefish for

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supper with a bit of Medford rum and lime in hot water."

"Dang me, Skipper," said George Flood, "I wouldn't mind the rum, but Joe can keep the bluefish."

"George," said Walter Chase shaking his head sadly, "I can't make out how you fellers can call yourselves Nantucketers when you like that awful, smelly cod better'n a little fried blue."

This discussion, which ebbed and flowed at the station depending on who was cook that week, somehow cheered Jesse Eldridge immensely. "Walter," he said, loudly and firmly, "even them rich Boston summer folk won't give a nickel a pound for blues. You know that as well as I do."

Chase leaned on the oar and turned them a bit more northerly, staring off at the lighthouse. He roared with laughter. "Jesse, them Boston folk smack their lips over three-day boiled cabbage and corn beef, flaked cod that would turn a hog's stomach, and fin and haddy so hard it would break a shark's jaw. Hell's delight, they wouldn't even *notice* a nice hot little blue laying in a nest of parsley, new potatoes, and melted butter."

They rowed on and on toward the light, and the men turned now and then to stare at the pinpoint, so bright and yet so tiny against the black swirl of wind. When they turned back to where the *Kirkham* had been, they saw answering bright and tiny spots in Walter Chase's eyes somehow reflecting and focusing Sankaty.

By ten that night the wind was blowing a three-quarter gale, and the current was rotating to the northeast. They could not go against it, and Walter Chase ordered the anchor down again. Now the wind, filled with a fitful snow, was bitter, and the men slumped against each other, their sweat drying coldly under their clothes, their heads nodding. Chase continually worked the steering oar, roused the men as they drifted off into frozen sleep, ordered the bow crewmen to watch the chafing of the line, and continually rotated his head seeking the great seas moving in the dark. They suddenly appeared as dim, faintly phosphorescent mountains that dashed out of and into the dark at terrifying speeds.

In the intense and shouting dark, the seas loomed huge and unsuspected. There was a wildness about them, a wholly random cruelty. The storm had blown for two days and unusual current motions had been set going. Walter Chase's head swiveled back and forth. He sensed the movement, the surge and backflow. The chill ate at his bones but his own cold resolve was more arctic still.

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Chase Five examined the lumpy and stationary sea. He then examined the rate of change of the water profiles. This was a deadly business! The circulation due to wind stress had rotated the current further than usual to the east. This set up a possible amplification with the flow between Bass Rip and McBlair's Shoal. There was a statistical possibility of one or more resonant occurrences that night! Yet, they were still relatively unlikely. No! Chase Five clamped the time flow even tighter and increased the gradient. Within minutes a resonance would actually occur! The wave would build at the north end of Rose and Crown, receiving energy from the cross flow and a sudden wind gust stress. It would break in a mile-long line just north of them and reach them cresting at eighteen feet. The chance of their staying upright was one in three. The chance of their not swamping was ... nil!

Chase Five, within the theoretical bounds set by entropy flow requirements, stopped time utterly. The continuum waited as Chase Five's neural interconnections achieved a higher level of synthesis. He saw a single possibility. If this resonant wave was unlikely enough ... yes... that was it! Extreme value probability theory could be modified within the time domain, providing that no significantly less likely event was occurring at that instant in the energy continuum. He could lower the expectation and make the wave more unlikely without interaction within the energy domain. Furthermore, it was not just the wave itself that was unlikely, but the wave interpreted by Chase Five, himself a most unlikely event.

That was it! He changed the probabilities, and the wave, instead of building towards its terrifying height, received its new energies at slightly different times and .... No!

The wave was suddenly building again! Chase Five sensed some other manipulation. Staggered, he clamped tightly on the time flow and asked his first question:

"Who?"

When Keeper Chase modified the laws of extreme value probability within the continuum, he forced us time-using observers to become participants in his struggle with the storm. While highly unlikely events occur infrequently, they exercise a hugely disproportionate effect on the evolution of the continuum. Just as a coastline on Keeper Chase's world will lie unchanged for a hundred years, to be altered drastically by a single unlikely storm lasting a few hours, so the improbable but possible events in the evolution of stellar and information systems often determine the

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long-term character of huge volumes of energy and temporal space. We could not, then, allow such essential probabilities to be manipulated at the whim of energy storms and energy-users. Thus we intervened and canceled the change. Keeper Chase detected us at once and asked his first question. We decided to answer him ...almost totally.

Chase Five received the full brunt of the information dump. Like the sky falling in from every angle, the answer to his question flowed faster than thought into his mind. It was an implosion of data, a total, sudden awareness of the continuum, of time and energy and information and their interactions. Of worlds and stars, creatures and spaces, hidden truths and intricate insights.

Chase Five was staggered. He clamped on the time flow and tried to organize it all. Like a swimmer, thrown deeply into the dark blue of the deep ocean, he fought and rose towards the light of day, moving through a boundless mass of data. Yet, what was happening? Why was he so deeply involved with these others? How did the *Kirkham*, one in ten thousand among such schooners, and these men, a few among millions, come to be at the center of all this? Chase Five assimilated the focal points of the continuum, but he did not yet understand himself or the nature of his adversaries. Clamping and clamping on the time stream, he desperately asked his second question:

"God?"

Irony, in the sense understood by those in Keeper Chase's world group, is not a normal component of time-using organizations and duties. Yet Keeper Chase's second question to us achieved the exact essence of that special quality. For if there was a single conscious entity within the entire continuum at the moment who qualified as "God," in the sense of Keeper Chase's question, it was Keeper Chase himself. We could not determine how large an information excess Keeper Chase could tolerate, but his confusion seemed to offer us an opportunity. We responded with the remaining information that we had withheld the first time: we showed Keeper Chase how the continuum was organized within its various aspects and, finally, the nature of consciousness within this organization and its relationship with the information, time, and energy aspects of the whole.

The second dump of information was not as extensive, but far more staggering. For Chase Five finally saw himself within the total

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continuum. He saw the circularity and hermetic nature of his activity at the *Kirkham*, the unlikely, really senseless character of the rescue and how unimportant, really meaningless were the men now barely alive in the wet and pitching boat. Good Lord, what was the point anyway? His control wavered and time began to slip. The wind moved back towards its own natural pace. The seas became more independent....

Now wait! Chase Five, in his puzzlement and despair, still processed data. And suddenly he saw the fallacy, the problem with their attacks against him. He steadied and clamped time. Yes! Yes, of course! He was stronger! The circularity didn't matter! What mattered was *only* the event! Everything led to that. And the more *unlikely* it was, the more *essential* it became. Yes! He, Walter Chase, Keeper of the Coskata Life Saving Station, was exactly and completely his own justification. And now Chase Five struck back at them. Masterful in his total control of information, gigantic astride the interlaced worlds of energy and time, he stated his third and final question. But because he completely dominated the continuum in all its aspects, he no longer asked. For he knew with complete certainty that none of them could deny what he stated.

"I am central to the evolution of the continuum. My control and my improbability are proof of that!"

At once the growing wave received its various inputs in harmless and likely sequences and passed under the Coskata boat as a huge but almost unnoticed roller. And with that, the storm on the Nantucket South Shoals began to die. For it, like all storms, had to obey the laws of probabilities, and after two harsh days, it was moving off and softening as it went.

Walter Chase, the steering oar now inboard as the wind slackened, saw that dawn and the new tide were coming together. "All right boys! This time we'll get there!" he shouted. In came the anchor and off they went, the great seas cresting no longer, the wind lessening, and the temperature rising as snow squalls came and went, grey against a dull dawn.

On and on they rowed, and Walter Chase now became aware that Perkins looked odd. His eyes were shining, liquid and bright, and his cheeks were much too red and also shining strangely. The boy rowed as strongly as any, but Chase watched him with more and more concern.

"Perkins," shouted Walter Chase, "see if that mate from the *Kirkham* can relieve you for a while."

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But Perkins was thinking of Abby on the beach. She would probably be there when they came in, for her brother was in the surfside crew and he would have told her that they were out. "I'm OK, Skipper," he said in a voice that Chase could barely hear. Chase peered through the snow at the rowers. Perkins was very sick. Perkins must....

Chase Six realized that Perkins was dying. The boy's level of consciousness integration had slipped drastically. Desperate, Chase Six plummeted down Perkin's time line seeking solutions everywhere. But the lessening of the storm had sapped his abilities. He could no longer clamp on time or integrate his hard-won information to tasks like this. Yet his very agony gave him the control to achieve the data that crushed, and crushed again, his hopes. How tenuous and marvelous self-awareness was in the continuum! How delicate, beyond yet imbedded within the energy system, linked with loops of information, operating within and yet outside of time. Perkins had driven himself, and been driven by Chase, beyond reintegration. And yet, Perkins was filled with joy! Within himself, Chase Six finally wept. And as he did, his powers fled away in an unending stream like the fog of a harsh night evaporating as the morning sun pierced through and through it.

Keeper Chase's great time-based powers failed as the emergency abated. Unable to maintain the temporal gradient without the urgency of the storm, he could no longer retrieve or even sustain his vast information resource in any practical sense. Yet he had defeated us and dominated the continuum at almost every moment of his adventure. Staggered after his second question and the implications of our answers, he went on to his final and greatest feat. He dared us to prove that he was not an essential evolutionary force within the continuum. Since such a determination would require understanding of other continuums, if such exist, and that necessary understanding would involve an information entropy gradient so vast that it could not even be theoretically sustained, he effectively blocked all further intervention.

But in the end he could not save his youngest crewman. He learned that conscious self-awareness is the most improbable and delicate balance of all within the continuum. Even his great strengths could not bring Surfman Perkins back from the temporal disintegration towards which he had slipped. If the energy-users of Keeper Chase's world group understood how novel and tenuous such consciousness

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actually is, they would surely behave far differently than they do.

The actual effects of his alterations within the continuum will only become evident in distant times and through much statistical activity on our part. But his greatest effect was the introduction of his third question, to which we may never have a complete or satisfactory answer. Of course, the so-called 'heroes' of Keeper Chase's world group always have this as their primary purpose; that is, the introduction of central and intractable questions.

At a little after nine in the morning of the twenty-first of January, the Coskata boat was sighted through the fading snow from the bluffs of Siasconset, eight miles south of the shore they had left the day before. Soon the entire community was out on the beach, silently watching the surfboat moving toward them, steered by Walter Chase standing at the stern.

The 'Sconset school teacher, a young, thin man who had spent two years reading literature at Harvard College, ran up the bluff, a dozen children behind him. As he topped the rise, the thin sun suddenly pierced the damp air and illuminated the tiny boat and its huge captain, looming back even a half mile out.

"Godfreys mighty!" exclaimed the young man to no one in particular. "It's Captain Ahab, himself!" for he believed that literature and life were contiguous.

"Naw tain't," said Widow Tilton. "Hit's Skipper Chase and the Coskata surfboat." She turned to stare at the young man and laughed. "Hit's the only red surfboat around. Skipper painted it red after the Muskeget boat was almost lost in the ice last December, 'cause no one could see it. They wrote from Boston. Said it was nonregulation. Skipper Chase, he wrote back. Don't remember all he wrote, but there was something in his letter about them desk navigators whose experience with ice amounted to sucking it out of their whiskey and sodas at lunch."

The school teacher had been only half listening, but now he turned and grinned at Widow Tilton. "He said that to them, did he?" The young man stared again at the approaching boat and then ran down the sand hill. "Come on, boys!" he shouted back at his class. "Let's help get this boat up!"

The Coskata boat grounded silently in a long swell, and a huge crowd waded into the backwash and pulled her up the slick sand. Everyone tried to help the men get out, yet still no one cheered. Instead, soft and kind words flew everywhere, and joy and comfort seemed to warm the very beach.

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Walter Chase boomed at the Macy boys to get their oxen and haul the boat up to the dunes. Then he turned and saw Perkins helped and held by Abby Coffin. The boy could no longer speak. Chase smiled at the girl. "Abby, don't take him home. Get him to your sister-in-law's house here in 'Sconset and put him to bed. Get him warm, quick as you can!"

But Abby knew. She could see the emptiness in Roland Perkin's eyes, his fevered cheeks. She wept, so full of grief and pride and love that she could not speak either. But always afterwards she remembered how sharp and yet sad Skipper Chase's eyes had been when he spoke to her and how completely he dominated the beach in those moments at the end of the rescue.

"Isaiah!" shouted Walter Chase. The youngster dashed up, beaming all over his face, so proud that Skipper Chase had picked him out of the great crowd.

"Yessir, Skipper!" he grinned.

"How's that hoss of yours, Isaiah?" said Walter Chase, and now he grinned too.

"Fastest hoss on Nantucket, Skipper," replied the boy promptly. "She'll win at the summer fair for sure!"

"Well, you climb aboard that nag and hustle for town. Find my wife and tell her we got back safe. Then find the rest of them. You know where the crew's folks live?"

The boy nodded and dashed off. Everyone was now moving up the beach toward the village. Each crewman of the *Kirkham* or man of Coskata was surrounded by residents helping them along, throwing coats or blankets over their shoulders, talking at them about the impossible miracle of the rescue.

Captain McCloud of the *Kirkham* staggered along between his huge black crewman and the Widow Tilton, herself well over six feet and two hundred and fifty pounds. Suddenly the old man pitched forward on his knees, pulling the weakened Negro down with him. "Dear God!" he shouted. "Thank Thee for this deliverance! Thank Thee for sparing thy humble servants. Thank Thee..."

Widow Tilton pulled the old man to his feet and, looking back, saw Walter Chase, huge against the dull sun, his tiny eyes like daytime stars. "You better not worry about thanking God, Mister," she suddenly said loudly. "It was Skipper Chase got you back here, and don't ever forget that!"

"Walter." It was his uncle beside him. "When they said you was coming in, I put on a gallon of coffee. Come on. Why, man, you're shaking like a leaf!"

Indeed, Walter Chase suddenly was shaking. He could not stop it

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and he let his uncle lead him over he dune and down to the little ıouse with its roaring driftwood-illed fire and the huge blackened ›ot of powerful coffee.

"Uncle," said Walter Chase as ıe sipped from a huge mug, "I'm haking so damn much I've got to lrink this outside."

He opened the door and tepped back into the narrow, utted 'Sconset street just as Joe Remsen, sharp in his blue uniform ınd issue cap, driving the dapper ›lack and gold-trimmed buggy of he Light House Service, pulled by ı smart, high-stepping bay, whirled ıround the corner and pulled up hort in a cloud of dust.

"God in Heaven, Walter!" houted Joe Remsen. "You all did ;et back!"

Walter Chase, his huge hands till shaking continuously in the hin, cold morning, looked smiling ıp at his old friend. "Joe, that's just he handsomest one-hoss outfit on he island," he said simply.

"Walter, they say she came part less than an hour after you ;ot them off! I saw her masts go lown at noon yesterday from the ower!"

Walter Chase stretched sud-ienly and stared, quite piercingly, ›ack at Joe Remsen. "Well," he aid, "we didn't need her after the rew got off, did we, Joe?"

At the time his old friend thought Walter Chase was joking, and he laughed out loud. But thinking back on that moment in later years, he realized that Walter Chase had meant what he said. The *Kirkham* had been allowed to collapse because she somehow wasn't *needed* any more. Yet he never asked about it again but only wondered.

Joe Remsen climbed down from the buggy and shook his head. "We figured you were goners. That damn tug went as far as Great Point and then turned back last night. Too blamed rough, they said, the rotten cowards! By God, Walter, there won't never be another rescue like this one! You better believe that! They're going to build that canal one of these days. Them gasoline engines'll get better and they'll put them in the surfboats. God Almighty, you took seven of them off. Not one lost. Twenty-six hours out in that smother! It's a miracle! Why, man, you moved heaven and earth..."

The hot coffee drained its warmth through Walter Chase and suddenly he felt drowsy. "Joe, we never did try a drail for squeteague out there. Just too blamed busy the whole time...."

And the two old friends grinned and chuckled at each other in the winter sunlight on a 'Sconset street.

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F&SF COMPETITION

REPORT ON COMPETITION 19

In the May issue we asked for limericks incorporating an sf title into the last line. The response was excellent; many fine entries were received which we just don't have room for. A special mention to Edwin MacDonald of Downsview, Ontario for his covering letter, which follows:

Dear Editor, Here you will find,
Attached to this sheet, in behind,
  Three winners, I ween,
  For contest nineteen.
Pray, now, will you please be so kind

As to teach me how I can unwind
My Muse from this limerick grind?
  Though the entries are done
  Their rhythms still run,
Occluding all else, in my mind.

Let's hope the next contest's designed
For verses of some other kind.
  In this hope I remain,
  Ted MacDonald by name,
Yours truly, as here undersigned.

Dan Mattern (of La Jolla, Ca. writes to ask that we mention the cities of winning competitors. Good idea Dan. I'll note that Westport, Connecticut has the lead after this one (thanks to the Ablitts), but someone else will have to keep track from here on in.

FIRST PRIZE

A young physicist started to stray
Toward metaphysical questions one day.
  He said, "Research begins
  Not with angels and pins,
But with, 'How much does one pearly *Gateway?*'."

In the year three-thousand-and three,
Baseball still is as big as can be.
  But ground space is short,
  And they had to resort
To *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea.*

—*David Lubar*
New Brunswick, NJ

SECOND PRIZE

We'll curry your princess-turned-frogs,
And groom your domestic balrogs,
  But for those with convention-
  al pets we should mention,
In passing, *We Also Walk Dogs.*

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Old broadcasts of dubious worth
Are now far from their planet of birth.
  Each Martian receiver
  Caught Leave It to Beaver
They called it *The Menace From Earth.*

—*Margery Goldstein*
Hudson, Mass.

RUNNERS UP

Though my vowels may sound a bit wuzzy,
And my consonants (hic) somewhat muzzy,
  Don't drink I am thunk —
  I mean think I am drunk;
My tongue's just a (hic) *Little Fuzzy.*

—*Doris McElfresh*
Spearfish, South Dak.

Said the red-head, while curling a tress,
"There have been (tho' I should not confess),
  Three earls; a brass band;
  Dukes numerous and
Nine Princes In Amber, no less."

—*Phoebe Ellis*
Millwood, Virginia

Miss Betty from Aldabaran
Is built like a Volkswagen van.
  On Earth she desires
  A husband with tires.
In short, *The Impossible Man.*

—*Amanda Ablitt*
Westport, Ct.

It was seven card stud near Orion
And with credits and wild cards flyin'
  I stayed all the way through
  But the best I could do
Was a black Ace, *Three Hearts and Three Lions.*

—*Garry Bleeker*
Satellite Beach, Fla.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Said a man on his way to the Sun,
"Of reading I fear I'll have none,
  Since it's hard to keep tomes
  When the heat in your home's
Over *Farenheit 451.*"

—*Margaret Ablitt*
Westport, Ct.

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The three earthlings and alien gaze
At each other in first contact daze.
"I'd not kiss either head."
One old astronaut said.
"But I wouldn't *Mindbridge* if she plays."
—*Steven Faber*
Los Angeles, CA

O, there's time for a million revisions
And eat-peach-roll-trouser decisions.
While waiting for Harlan
With blood, sweat and snarlin',
To bring forth *The Last Dangerous Visions.*
—*Joe W. Haldeman*
Ormond Beach, Fla.

DISHONORABLE MENTION

An explorer who lived on the moon,
With the aid of the juice of the prune,
Two flexible trowels
And some badly stained towels,
Created his very own *Dune.*
— *Sidney H. Mayer, Jr.*
Evanston, Ill.

COMPETITION 20 (thanks to Steven D. Faber and Christopher Leithiser)

Look in the classified ads section of any newspaper; quite a variety of stuff for sale, rent, wanted. How much more varied will they be in the far future, when alien worlds and strange technology provide new items wanted or for sale. Submit a maximum of five classified ads from a future newspaper, e. g.:

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Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by September 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, Six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 20 will appear in the January issue.

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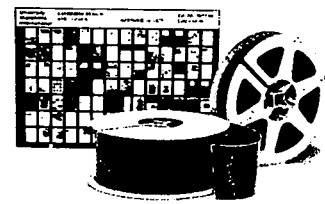

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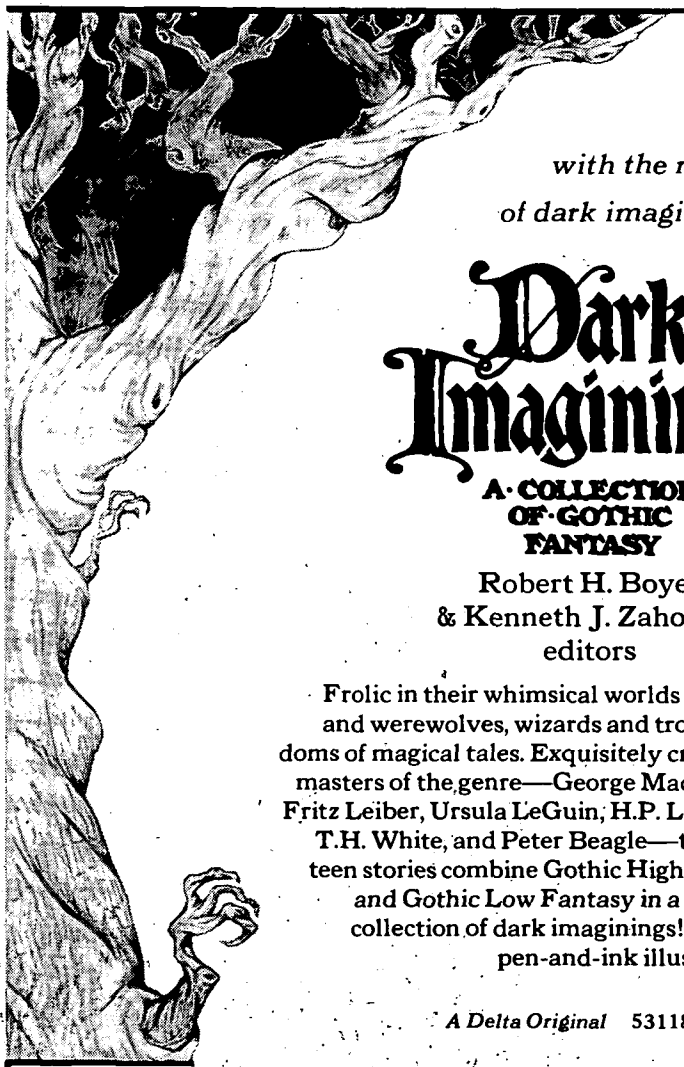

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